

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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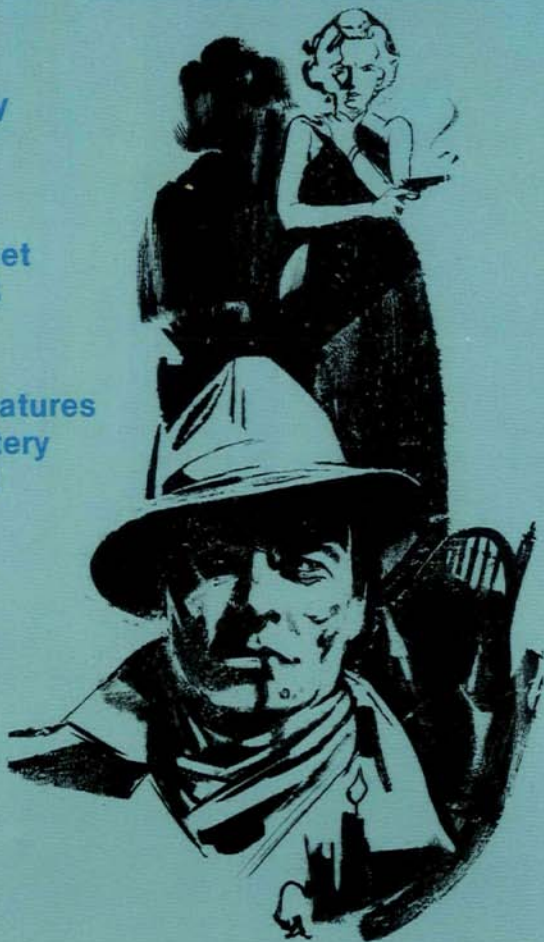


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EDWARD GOLDSTEIN
ANITA GOLDSTEIN
Publishers

CHARLES E. FRITCH
Editor

ROBIN SCHAFFER
Art Director

LEO MARGULIES
Founder

SANDCASTLES

by Brett Halliday

It wasn't like Mike Shayne to be missing for several days, and his friends were worried. They had reason to be, for when they found him, they learned the terrible truth behind his absence! 4

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They found Mike Shayne on the beach, unresponsive, bleeding. What terrible events had led the Miami detective to this fate?

Sandcastles

by BRETT HALLIDAY

LUCY HAMILTON CLOSED THE LAST OF THE WINDOWS IN the outer room of the Flagler Street office. Pulling her sweater over her shoulders, she gazed through the dirt-glazed panes. The slate-gray skies, the stiff northern wind, and the dropping temperatures were not normal for Miami, even in the fall. At least the four-day seige of rain had lifted, she thought as an involuntary chill swept through her, making her feel the November dawn down to her marrow.

Something was definitely wrong. And it wasn't just the weather. Here it was, the beginning of a Friday, and she hadn't seen or heard from Mike Shayne since last Sunday. Each day she had sat at her desk, telling the clients on the phone—and herself—that "He'll be in soon." In all the years she had worked with him, Miami's best-known private investigator had always checked in, either in person or on the phone.

Last night she had been so certain he would make contact, she had fallen asleep waiting on the tattered couch he was always promising to get reupholstered. A spring whined like a baby as she sat down and began to check her face in her compact.

"What do you think, Luce," she said to the tired-eyed woman in the mirror, "was it something I said the other night?"

"No," answered the image, "there's probably a good explanation for what's happened."

"You're right," said Lucy. "Some case that came up suddenly and took him to New York or California."

"Then why didn't he call?" said the face in the mirror.

Lucy hesitated. She could come up with a thousand good reasons, but they'd all be curtains to hide the one picture she didn't want to see but knew was there.

The portrait draped in black of her redhaired man lying face down in some alley, his life slowly leaking from a gaping hole in his back.

She shuddered again, wishing that his burly arms were there to enfold her in a cocoon of warmth and to assure her that everything would be all right. She had called every place he frequented—his apartment, The Beef House, The Golden Cock—and everybody he hung around with—Tim Rourke at the DAILY NEWS, Will Gentry at Metro, and even Peter Painter, his Miami Beach nemesis.

Nothing.

Shayne's desk yielded no clue to his whereabouts either, and when she had used her key to let herself in his apartment, all she had found was an unslept-in bed.

God, how she loved that man.

FOOTFALLS ECHOED DOWN THE OUTSIDE HALLWAY. They had a familiar gait. She rose, literally ran to the door, and forcing a smile, threw it open.

"Hello, Angel."

Her facade fell like a ghetto tenement victimized by urban renewal. In the hallway stood a sleepy-eyed figure in a moth-eaten cardigan. She could still smell the camphor.

"Hi, Tim," she finally managed.

"You got something to warm the blood of a frozen Irishman, lass?"

She pointed at the file cabinet where Shayne always kept a bottle of rye for the reporter.

"You haven't heard from him either, have you?" Rourke said.

"No," she said, fighting back the sudden tears. She had to tell somebody what had crept out of her unconscious and now was poised ominously in her consciousness. "You're his friend. Do you think I could have driven him away by something I said?"

Rourke laughed gently. "What words could you possibly have used, Angel, that would have driven that big Mick away?"

Nervously she smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt. "Sunday night we had steak and a few drinks at my apartment. Afterwards, maybe it was the wine, but I started daydreaming—out loud."

"What do you mean?" Rourke said, pouring the cheap whiskey into a water glass.

"You know, us. Michael and me. How we might . . . someday . . . well, the two of us . . ."

"Get married?"

"Yes, and have a house and family."

"Why would that drive him away?"

"You know how dependent, how committed to his work he is. There's just never been room for a wife and kids after what happened to Phyllis."

The scarecrow figure reached out. She took his hand. She was about to let it all out when the telephone rang.

"It's him, I know it's him." She yanked up the receiver. "Michael, I've been so worried," she shouted, breaking sharply from her usual business-like manner.

"Sorry, Lucy," said a gravelly voice. "This is Will."

"Will, what's wrong? It's Michael, isn't it?"

The police chief cleared his throat. "There'll be a black-and-white there any second. Get in it. Yeah, we've found him, on the beach."

WHEN LUCY HAMILTON AND TIM ROURKE EXITED THE squad car on the dawn-drenched beach, they were greeted by a blast of air that seemed to have come straight from the Arctic. One of the uniformed policemen broke his silence to point at a distant speck down the beach.

They started walking slowly, then removed their shoes and ran. The cold, wet sand drove icy spikes into their uncovered soles. They zigzagged to avoid the dried-up palm fronds and driftwood that littered the deserted beach.

As they drew closer, they could see red hair perched above a sand dune. The hair was blowing in the wind, but the head was motionless.

"Michael," screamed Lucy.

The figure did not reply.

They scrambled up the shadow-shrouded dune.

"Oh, my God!" shuddered the secretary.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Rourke.

At the base of the dune, shirtless, shoeless, and his tan trousers rolled to his knees sat Mike Shayne. The two friends circled the detective. Oblivious to their presence as well as the steady sandblasting of the wind, the seated figure stared straight ahead at the horizon like a religious supplicant in meditation.

"Shamus," said Rourke, "I know Martell's a good anti-freeze, but you'll catch your death out here this morning."

The trembling hands of Lucy Hamilton reached out and touched his brawny shoulders. He was as cold as a marble statue.

"Michael," she repeated.

No response.

"Look at this thing," said the reporter. He pointed at a mound in front of the rawboned redhead. The sand had been shaped into a grotesque sculpture. At its base was a bearded face that resembled Father Time. Its mouth opened wide to form the letter O, and across the brow ran what looked like a thin, jagged scar. Protruding from the top of the skull was a walled structure in minute detail from its parapets to its keep.

"Holy cow," said the reporter, "it's a sandcastle. Mike Shayne building a sandcastle?"

Lucy stooped down and gently grasped the redhead's right hand. Noticing blood seeping over a splintered piece of driftwood his fingers were wrapped around, she removed the bone-white wood and began to bandage the wound with her handkerchief.

"Michael," she said, battling against the impulse to cry, "what's happened to you? What could have driven you to this?"

SHAYNE TURNED RIGHT OFF ROYAL PALM WAY ONTO AIA. The night breeze off the ocean was cooler than usual, and the redhead guessed a storm was coming. The phone had been ringing when he had returned from a Sunday-night dinner with Lucy. The caller, a Phoebe Athens from Palm Beach, had asked, then begged him to come up immediately. Her son was missing.

"Have you called the police?" Shayne said.

"No. We were afraid it could be a kidnapping, and letting them in on it might endanger Ted, Jr.," she sobbed.

Maybe it was the panic in a worried mother's voice, maybe it was the discussion he had just had with Lucy, or maybe it was the soft spot he had in his heart for the kid he had almost had with Phyllis, but he agreed to talk.

A mile past Worth Avenue he found the Athens estate. Entering through a rusty iron gate, he drove down a long road. Unlike most Palm Beach homes that were well-cared-for by an army of gardeners, he saw in the bright moonlight that this one was overrun with tangled vines, interlocked seagrasses, and untrimmed underbrush. At the end of the drive the road split toward two houses that seemed mirror images. Each, a century old at least, looked like it had grown from the very ground itself. Dirty, pitted, and captured by green parasites, the stucco facades were cross-stitched by prominent cracks.

Sitting in front of the house on the right was what appeared to be an old man who never moved from a wicker chair. For some reason Shayne turned left.

No sooner had he stopped the Buick than a darkhaired woman emerged from the house.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Mr. Shayne," she said, taking his hand and squeezing it.

The big detective gazed at the woman in front of him. Her skin was an olive hue, and her coal-black hair cascaded to her shoulders. But what caught his attention and held it were the deep-set, raven eyes. Hers was not a fragile cover-girl beauty, but an animal sensuousness that attacked Shayne at the instinctual level.

They walked down a dark, cave-like hallway. Leading Shayne into a huge den, the woman pointed to a man standing before a massive fireplace. With flames that darted out like serpents' tongues, Shayne decided it could have passed for a gateway to hell.

"Ted," she said, "this is Michael Shayne from Miami."

"So you didn't listen to me," said the small, fire-halqed figure. "You called that private eye anyway."

"Hey, listen," said the big redhead, "I don't want to get into the middle of anything." From the day he had first opened his office, Shayne had made it policy to steer clear of domestic cases—they brought nothing but trouble.

"Ted, you wouldn't let me call the police. I had to do something," said the woman. "After all, he's my son as well as yours."

"Dammit, Phoebe! The boy'll show up sooner or later. Doesn't he always?"

Shayne interrupted. "Your son has a history of running away?"

"Not really running away," said the woman. "Teddy's just very curious about what goes on outside. Tierra Nueva's a big estate."

"And he'll be home any minute now," said her husband.

"My God, Ted, the last we saw of him he was going to bed Friday night. You've kept me from calling too long as it is." The darkhaired woman grabbed the lapels of his velvet smoking jacket, her eyes gleaming in the firelight.

"Take it easy now, Mrs. Athens," said Shayne, restraining her. "Do you have a picture of Teddy?"

"In his room," she said, "upstairs."

She led him up into the darkness on a circular staircase that creaked and moaned under their combined weight. From the coldness her husband had displayed, his apparent lack of interest in his son, Shayne

could readily see why he chose to remain in front of the fire.

"Don't misunderstand Ted," she said as if reading his mind. "He worries about Ted, Jr.—in his own way."

They walked down a silent, shadowy corridor to a white door. Phoebe Athens opened it and flipped on a light. "This," she said, "is my little Teddy Bear's room."

Shayne squinted. The room was ablaze with color. One wall was canary-yellow, another sunburst orange, and a third fire-engine red. The fourth wall was papered with an airplane print in which jumbo jets fought for air space with Piper Cubs and fighters. String-suspended Sopwith Camels dueled with Fokkers above his head. Even the bedspread and drapes were done in a STAR WARS motif.

"Somebody around here likes planes," said Shayne.

The darkhaired woman drew the drapes and opened the window. Into the stuffy room flowed the distant roar of jets. Shayne saw an occasional light wink through the window at him.

"We're right in the flightpath for Palm Beach International," she said. "There's almost nothing Teddy'd rather do than sit by this window and watch the planes come and go."

Shayne smiled, remembering his own childhood fascination with roadbuilding machinery. He reached down and picked up a Fisher-Price play airplane from the floor. It looked like it had had its share of crash landings.

"This is Teddy," she said, handing him a 5x7 frame.

The redhead mentally photographed the picture of a darkhaired, darkeyed boy. What struck Shayne was the position of his lips. They seemed poised halfway between a grimace and a smile.

Phoebe Athens grabbed Shayne's bicep and said, "Find him for me, please. For fourteen years he's been something special to me . . . to us."

"I'll try," he said, noting her peculiarly powerful grip.

The redhead was pondering the seeming discrepancy of a teenager in a child's room when he noticed something laying against the baseboard. On impulse he picked it up—a tiny wooden figure that seemed to belong to the airplane the detective had just left on a table. He rolled it between his thumb and fingers, noting its black hair was chipped and its base split.

As her husband had vanished, she supplied general answers to Shayne's list of usual questions. She had nothing more to offer.

He got in the Buick just as the first drops of rain shattered on his windshield. At the split in the road, the redhead was wondering just

where to go in the case when his headlights caught a skeletal shape. It began to pound on the car's front fender with a black cane.

Shayne rolled down his window and stopped. The man he had seen sitting in front of the house on the other fork suddenly thrust his bearded face into the Buick. He reeked of cheap gin, and his cheeks were splotched with red sores.

"Don't waste your time lookin' for that boy, mister," he said with fummy breath. "He ain't right in the head. Been better of if'n he'd never been born. Just let him go."

Before Shayne could respond, the figure disappeared with a suddenness that questioned if he had really been there at all.

"MICHAEL, PLEASE ANSWER," LUCY BEGGED.

Rourke removed his cardigan and draped it over the redhead's wide shoulders. "Come on, you stubborn Irishman. We've got to get you inside."

Lucy took one arm and Rourke the other. They tried to lift in unison, but it was as if the redhead were rooted in the sand.

"What are we going to do?" she said.

"I don't know, Angel, but it better be fast. Look how the tide's rising."

A solitary finger of water reached out for Shayne's uncovered foot.

THE FIRST WAVE OF RAINWATER SMASHED AGAINST THE Buick's windshield. The storm had come with a suddenness and grown with a ferocity the big detective had not expected. Crossing the intercoastal Waterway, he passed the long line of bars and adult bookstores that prospered where weeds had in the past and turned right.

It was only a hunch, but what else did he have to go on? Parking the car in the short-term lot, he sprinted through the torrents to the main terminal of Palm Beach International.

For the next hour he showed the picture of Teddy Athens to everyone on the nightshift, knowing full well that they might not have been on the past two nights. He had received more turndowns than an ugly streetwalker when the cards broke right for him.

"Yeah," said a security guard while his teeth attacked a piece of chewing gum. "Not much going on here at night. I noticed the kid. Those retards stand out."

Shayne bit his lip and said, "Last night?"

"Last three nights. First night he was here by himself, but the last few he's come in with Arnold."

"Who's Arnold?"

"Your friendly neighborhood panhandler. Among all the mink strolling through here, his torn tuxedo jacket stands out almost as much as the kid."

"You said he was in here tonight," said Shayne, deciding that if he lit up a cigarette he'd probably use it as a branding iron. "Is he here now?"

"Naw. Those two misfits left about midnight."

"Any idea where I might find them?"

"Try Cinemagic."

"What's that?"

"Back on the highway. You can't miss the marquee."

"Shows porno movies," said Shayne.

"Guys with taste," said the guard as he blew a bubble, "call them art pictures."

As Shayne pivoted, he said, "Then you'd better refer to them as porno movies."

THE RAIN-SOAKED DETECTIVE PAID HIS PARKING TICKET and headed south. The thunder outside could have been his gut exploding. Sure, he was happy his hunch had paid off—really, with the crowded sky in Teddy's room, it hadn't been much of a guess, and what other direction could he have gone in at that time of night?—but the guard's insensitivity pissed him off more than his own lack of perception. The redhead knew he should have suspected that the boy was different—a fourteen-year-old living in a world of children's toys, his habit of wandering off, his father's reticence to talk, his mother's overprotectiveness as well as her reference to "special."

Shayne's general concern with the missing boy had turned into a particular fear. What was the kid doing in the porno district with a tramp?

He couldn't miss Cinemagic. The blue lights announcing **GOLDDILOCKS AND THE THREE BARES** invited travellers with time on their hands to spend their few hours between Palm Beach and Pittsburg in a sleazy fantasyland.

The fat woman squatting in the ticket booth popped up with her hand out. "Ten bucks, mister, and you'd better hurry. Show started five minutes ago."

"Gee," said Shayne, "that doesn't even give me time to buy popcorn."

"No popcorn here. What do you think this is, the Bijou?"

Shayne handed her a crisp twenty. "Where's Arnold?"

"Hey, look, I just let the slob sleep in back. As long as he cleans out my theatre, I don't cause no trouble, I don't ask no questions."

Keeping a water-laden newspaper over his head, Shayne circled the poster-covered building until he spotted a door marked KEEP OUT.

The redhead didn't bother to knock. The small room looked like a library after a hurricane. Books on shelves, books on the floor, books stacked against the walls. In the eye of the storm was a stained, overstuffed chair. Springs sprouted from it like random wire hairs. Sprawled in the mismatched cushion was a figure clad only in shorts and a torn, sleeveless t-shirt. He was snoring.

Shayne started to look around. Through the thin walls he heard Goldilocks pouting because Papa Bare was too big. The redhead picked up one of the paperbacks—Churchill's HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING PEOPLES, VOLUME II.

"Can't wait till somebody abandons VOLUME III in the concourse," said a voice from the chair. "Churchill had a sense of morality you don't find nowadays."

Shayne was more surprised at what the figure had said and how he spoke than that he had awakened. "Arnold?" said the big detective.

"That's me all right."

"Where's Teddy Athens?"

"I figured sooner or later they'd send somebody out looking."

"What do you mean?"

"Usually Teddy just spends the night and goes back home."

"He's been here before?"

"Oh yes! The lad and I love to watch the migratory patterns of the big silver birds. Teddy's a real gem in other ways too. Just last week he spotted a discarded copy of Dickens' BLEAK HOUSE hiding beneath a large cushion across from the Delta desk."

"His parents never mentioned you."

"I'm our little secret. Like when Huck Finn never said a word about the island where Jim was hiding, and besides the Athens don't care enough about Teddy to ask."

"Hey, pal, I just came from his mother, and it looked to me like she cared a hell of a lot."

"Oh, Phoebe's happy as long as she can keep her little boy growing in the Tierra Nueva hothouse of hers. You know, Mister . . ."

"Shayne's the name."

"Oh, just like the classic Western hero."

"Just add a 'y'," said the detective.

"As I was saying, the only trouble with plants raised solely in a

hothouse is they get rootbound. Past a certain point they don't grow any more." He reached down for a cigar stub. "Throwaways. Used to be a man'd take a couple of draws and throw it aside. Nowadays the ones I find in the house look like they've been smoked till the holder's fingertips burned."

Not interested in a dissertation on the disposable society, Shayne growled, "Where's the boy?"

"Safe. Of course any place'd be safer than that false Eden across the way."

"Listen, pal, I . . ."

"You don't look old enough to me to know about the Athens. They probably drained more out of these parts than the Flaglers. Started back in Prohibition. If people wanted it, Old Man Athens smuggled it in. Of course, Cyrus, like a lot of the nouveau riche, didn't know how to handle the money he got. Lavished it on parties, each one more debauch than the last. Oh, I could tell you tales of what went on at Tierra Nueva. Gambling, white slavery, exotic señoritas from Havana, mate swapping."

"Did you read about that in one of your books?"

"Read about it." The old man laughed loudly. "My good man, I lived it. Do you think anybody could sink to my level of degeneracy by random chance? Hell, no. Mine was calculated escape from that lascivious lifestyle. Don't you think it's quite an irony I should end up here?"

"In a porno palace?"

"On this land. Who do you think originally sold it off for men to erect monuments to their debauchery?"

"The Athens?"

"Precisely."

"I'm more worried about the present, pal," said the redhead, his earlier fear tingling his impatience. "One more time—where's Teddy Athens?"

"I told you. The boy is safe."

Instinctively Shayne grabbed the frail figure by the front of his shirt and jerked him forward. "Where?"

From behind the makeshift curtain across the room, a child's voice called out, "Arnold, it's the loud voices again. I'm scared."

"Go back to sleep, son," said the old man. "Everything's going to be all right."

Shayne released his grip just before a tiny face framed by the dirty sheet appeared. "Who's he?" said the boy, his voice quivering.

Arnold stared at the redhead.

"A friend, Teddy," said Shayne.

"No, he's not," said the kid. "They sent him to get me. I heard the loud voices. I know what's next. Arnold, don't make me go back this time."

"Easy," said Shayne, starting forward.

The old man put his hand on Shayne's arm and said, "Let me handle this."

Not knowing why, Shayne stepped back, then listened. Seeping between the boy's sobs and Arnold's soothing words was the guttural laughter from beyond the thin wall. In a few minutes the old man reappeared.

"He's asleep now," said the t-shirted figure. "Please try to be quieter."

"What does he mean by the loud voices?" said Shayne. "And why's he so afraid to go back home?"

"Well, Mr. Shayne, his parents have never gotten along. Ted has battled with Phoebe since they were kids, but what can you expect from an offspring of Cy Athens? The Bible-spouting devil should have known the sins of the father are visited on the son."

"Lots of couples fight."

"But the Athens' quarrels don't stop with yelling. Come here."

As the old man parted the dirty sheet, the image of Phoebe Athens' grabbing her husband's lapels flashed before the redhead.

"Tell me, Mr. Shayne, do most shouting matches end up this way?"

He pulled back the covers. Teddy Athens was sleeping on his stomach. Arnold gently lifted his t-shirt.

Shayne closed his eyes and turned away. A quick glance was more than enough time to see the welts and bruises that crisscrossed the small back like some obscene roadmap.

"TIM," SAID A WEARIED LUCY, "WE'RE NOT GOING TO BE able to move Michael by ourselves."

"You stay here with him," said the shivering reporter. He stood up and looked around. The early-morning beach was still vacant. "I'll head back to where the boys in the black-and-white let us off and see if they hung around."

Lucy, feeling the icy surf against her own legs, dropped her eyes. The base of the sand sculpture had started to erode, and the foam-filled surf was now washing over Shayne's legs.

"Michael," she screamed, "you've got to move. This spot'll be totally under any minute."

THE BUICK'S BUMPER LIKE A BOAT'S PROW PLOWED through the water standing on AIA. In all the years the big detective had been in Miami, he had never seen a storm last so long. Usually they hit in late afternoon and were gone by nightfall, but this one had stalled over southern Florida, battering the coast for four solid days.

He urged the accelerator closer to the floor. Despite the washed-out patches in the road, he hurled the Buick toward the Athens' estate. He had been in the business long enough to understand the burning in his gut—something was wrong, really wrong, and it was about to get worse.

He had spent the whole week in the Palm Beach area so busy he hadn't even had time to call in to the office. He was torn between client loyalty and a sense of what was right. Yeah, he had been hired to bring the boy back, but how could he, knowing what he knew. Arnold wasn't your typical pillar of society, but something in his voice, his manner, told Shayne he was at least a moral man. And the Athens—well, they'd never qualify for Mr. and Mrs. America.

Early Monday morning, rightly or wrongly, he had made his decision—not to take Teddy back to his parents immediately. That's when it hit the fan. A few hours later he had driven back to Tierra Nueva and resigned from the case, at least officially. After assuring the Athens that their son was O.K., he had told them to their faces he could not return the boy until he got some things straight.

Phoebe Athens had cried. Ted Athens had picked up a poker from the fireplace, then thought better of it. Shayne had been almost disappointed that the small man had spared the rod this time.

When they finally attacked, it had been in the new American tradition. Their champion was a fast-talking attorney from a firm with more names than the register at an hourly-rates hotel.

The redhead had countered by talking to people on the West Palm force he had made friends with during previous cases. Then he had gone to some social agencies. Finally to a lawyer of his own. Everywhere the answer was the same. Teddy was the son of a powerful family who had friends in high and low places. Nobody was willing to cross the Athens family, especially when the evidence against them was the testimony of a "down-and-out reprobate" and a "mentally-handicapped minor."

The matter had been made moot a few hours earlier. Arnold's secret was not as secure as he had thought. Somehow Ted Athens had gotten word of his son's location. Late Thursday when the redhead had returned to the back of Cinemagic after another disappointing

interview with another concerned but helpless official, he had found Arnold unconscious. According to the doctor in the Emergency Room, his left shoulder was dislocated, his left cheekbone cracked, his right forearm broken, and both kneecaps had been so shattered it was doubtful the old man, if he lived, would ever walk again. It was, the physician concluded, as if he had been attacked by a maniac with a ball bat.

Or a fire poker, Shayne thought.

What was worse, Teddy was gone. Arnold had regained consciousness just before they had wheeled him into the operating room and said two words—"Tierra Nueva."

THE BUICK DIDN'T STOP FOR THE CLOSED IRON GATES AT the entrance. If Ted Athens could brutalize a man like he had Arnold, the redhead figured, what was he capable of doing to a fourteen-year-old boy?

As Shayne got out of the Buick, a wave of rain slapped him in the face. Then, in the brief moment between the lightning's flash and the thunder's roar, he heard the shot.

Too late, the redhead's mind told him, but that didn't stop his legs from splashing through the ankle-high water. He didn't bother to stop for the door. Leaving its splintered remains dangling from its hinges, he catapulted into the foyer.

Phoebe Athens stood at the top of the serpentine staircase, seemingly oblivious to the redhead's entry. As he started up the shadow-laced stairs, he spotted the pistol in her hand. She was looking down.

When he got halfway up the steps, Shayne saw the body on the floor. Ted Athens lay there, his mouth opened almost as wide as the hole in his chest. His outstretched fingers pointed to the blood-smeared object that had fallen from his grasp.

The fire poker.

"Why?" said the redhead.

Her gun aimed at the hardwood floor, she started down the hallway.

Shayne followed. Her resounding footsteps made the mansion seem empty. The white door was halfway opened. She pushed against it, then stepped aside.

The redhead entered.

The ceiling was deserted. Shayne's eyes dropped. Protruding from the shards of shattered plastic was dark hair.

No more loud voices, the redhead thought as the numbness spread outward from his gut.

"My husband couldn't take it," she began in an emotionless monotone. "Teddy said he wanted to stay with Arnold."

"Your husband did this?" Shayne said flatly.

"I tried to stop him." She dropped the gun onto the floor and walked out.

The redhead listened as her slippered feet disappeared down the hallway. He felt as empty as the house seemed.

"You witch," said a broken male voice. "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live."

Shayne was three steps out of the room when he heard the blast.

Phoebe Athens' body, like that of a marionette, was jerked upward and slammed into a wall.

"I saw everything," said the strange voice. "You could not escape my vision."

Shayne appeared at the top of the staircase in a crouch, his .38 in his right hand.

The black cane had been replaced by a .12 gauge double-barrel, but the redhead recognized the old man by his bearded, red-splotched face.

"Put it down, Athens," barked the big detective.

Cyrus Athens, standing at the bottom of the staircase, let go of the shotgun. "She deserved to die," he said, "for what she done to the boy."

"What do you mean?" said the redhead cautiously.

"Saw it all from my porch. She's been a violent one since the day her mother bore her. For years Ted's tried to control that temper of hers. Even put her in one of those fancy rest homes for awhile. Always knew, though, it wouldn't do no good."

"You mean she was beating Teddy and Ted tried to stop her?"

"He took the poker from her. She went out and got her gun and shot him with no more feeling than you or I'd swat a fly. That girl's had a streak of meanness in her since she was born. Course it figures—she's got Athens blood in her."

Remembering what Arnold had told him about Ted's father, Shayne put the two together. "Are you telling me she . . ."

"Phoebe was my daughter by what we called in those days 'a temporary indiscretion.'"

"Your son married his half-sister," said the detective incredulously.

"Nobody knew it at the time. It wasn't till her mother died a few years ago that I found it out. Guess that's why the boy wasn't quite right."

It struck the redhead that what Phoebe Athens had told him was

partly true—only it was she, not her husband, who couldn't stand it when her son had said he wanted to live with Arnold. Shayne cursed himself. When she had grabbed her husband's lapels, why hadn't he seen it?

"It's all my fault," the old man continued as if compelled to speak. "I should have had her committed years ago when we first saw that streak of hers. But I couldn't stand a blight on the family reputation. Thought I could take care of her here at Tierra Nueva. When she dragged the boy back earlier tonight, I should have stopped things then too. All my life as I built this home and the Athens' name up, I thought I could do as I pleased. But when you build your house on sand, as the Book says, someday the rains are going to come." He got down on one knee and lifted his hands upward. "Look what I brought down around me. Shoot me, mister. I can't take the pain over what I've done."

Shayne walked down the staircase, holstering the .38 as he descended.

"Have mercy, mister. Please!" he heard behind him.

Outside, Shayne noticed the rain was letting up, but it had been replaced by a cold wind that would have frozen him, if it weren't too late for that.

"Kill me!" the solitary voice in the house begged.

The redhead knew that he'd talk to the police, but not now. Now was not a time for words.

SHAYNE'S RIGHT ARM THROWN OVER HER SHOULDER, Lucy Hamilton strained under the weight. "Tim," she screamed as her feet tumbled from beneath her.

The sand sculpture had almost vanished. The salt water had already washed away the face. Only a solitary tower remained above the rising tide.

"Angel," answered Rourke, suddenly appearing beside her with two policemen.

Methodically the four of them dragged the cold, wet detective from the water. They had just reached the dry sand when without warning the redhead surged free.

While the four of them watched, Shayne waded into the ocean. Just before the waves covered the last evidence of what he had built, the big redhead reached into the tower and plucked something.

The powerful waves crashing around him, in his meaty hand he cradled a tiny wooden figure with chipped black hair and a split base.

A banging came at the door, followed by the splintering of wood as bullets slammed through the door. The killers had found him—and he was trapped!

Signoff

by CARL HOFFMAN

SOMEONE WAS PHONING. HARRY HICKS COULD SEE THE clear plastic button blinking silently on the base of the telephone, but he didn't pick it up; it was time to go on the air. He flipped the mike switch:

"Stereo First, WFNR Winona. It's coming on eight minutes past midnight, and here's Ray Coniff . . ."

He switched on the turntable, and as the sugary strains of "Close to You" began wafting from the monitor, he picked up the telephone, which was still blinking ON—OFF—ON.

"Good evening, WFNR."

No one spoke.

Harry Hicks listened another moment, then hung up, grimacing. Another nut, and outside was a blizzard. He glanced out the window, mouth twisting. Snow. Tapping the windows like gust of fine gravel, haloing the silver overhead lamp across the road from the studio. A car cruised past slowly—it looked like a BMW, the same model he used to drive, in his other life a thousand years ago—and he wondered why the driver had to be out in this weather. It was the umpteenth blizzard since he'd arrived in this nowhere town three weeks ago, and in another couple of hours the world would be unrecognizable, smothered under a white sea, a frozen ocean.

He grimaced again, thinking of his own stupidity.

Peaceful late night work, no experience necessary, the ad had said; just the thing for his nerves, he'd thought, and besides no one would see his face. It was safer than working in a store or office. Voices on the radio were anonymous, disturbances of molecules that died in the air. He imagined playing soft music to thousands as night edged toward dawn.

He found it different when he got the job. A late-night disc jockey at WFNR sat isolated in a haunted shack on the edge of a farmfield as the wind raved outside. The studio was possessed by its own spirits, electronic poltergeists that lurked behind his back, clicking, slipping from mike to console to revox. They set the VU needles dancing and spurred the teletype into abrupt chattering. The doublepaned viewing windows between rooms reflected eyes that winked yellow and red in his peripheral vision and made him jump. Under the control board a hundred thick wires burrowed straight into the floor, straight to hell, and he sat on the edge of the pit for six hours a night, eight p.m. to two a.m., spinning one inane disc after another into the screaming dark as the wind howled across the field outside.

And thinking.

Thinking of Jennifer. Jennifer with the auburn hair and freckles, the brown eyes full of life, the eyebrows arching when she laughed. His high school sweetheart Jennifer, whom he had loved for as long as he could remember, whom he had courted, married, and who now was just a decaying mass of organic matter six feet underground. Because of his greed.

Because of his undying, everlasting greed.

IT HAD STARTED EASILY ENOUGH THAT SUMMER HE WAS twenty-nine, oh yes, so easy. Seven years' work had made him owner of a convenience shop in San Diego—he'd climbed from assistant manager to manager, from manager to partner, from partner to owner, every step of the way lubricated with his sweat and long hours, and with his business sense, that synonym for his greed, his infallible instinct for jacking up prices as high as the market could bear. The future was boundless; already he had his eye on another store across town. After that, who knew where he would go.

And then one bright-hot afternoon death appeared, walking into the store, asking to see him. Of course he hadn't known that at that time; Oily Coalbright was a glad-hander, a member of the Chamber of Commerce, a jolly fat man in a maroon real-estate agency blazer, his

hair slicked back, a smile on his pudgy lips. Just a little proposition, he'd said, a little easy money. Harry Hicks had rocked back in his chair in the cramped office and looked Oily up and down, remembering the rumors he'd heard about him. "How would a hard-working guy like me make some easy money?"

"Just relax," Oily told him. "Relax and watch it roll in."

And then he outlined the plan; all Harry Hicks had to do was invest a little cash that Oily would supply him. No risk whatsoever, no need for Harry to put up any of his own money. All Harry had to do was take the monthly cash payments Oily would bring and invest them in an up-and-coming land development on the edge of town known as Rancho Coronado, the sweetest condominiums this side of Heaven. For this easy service Harry would receive a seven per cent commission.

"We can start next week if you say yes," Oily told him. "Say in the neighborhood of \$100,000, with payments of about the same amount every month following for the next eight months."

"Seven per cent of \$100,000 is seven thousand dollars."

"Your arithmetic is impeccable," said Oily, grinning his best Lion's Club grin. "What do you say?"

Harry asked for the night to think about it, but in fact his mind was already made up. He knew he would accept. And he knew too that there was no way the money could possibly be honest. One hundred thousand dollars in cash could come only from drugs, or gambling, or prostitution, or any of a dozen other rackets that used businesses like convenience stores to launder their dirty money. He wondered what mobsters Oily was connected with, how he had gotten involved with them. But no matter who they were, \$56,000 was not to be turned down, regardless of where it came from, especially if it walked right in the front door one summer afternoon.

FOR FOUR MONTHS IT WENT LIKE A DREAM. HE LIED TO Jennifer about the booming business, the rush of customers which let him put up down payment on the store across town, and she accepted it with the faith she'd always shown, the faith that had kept them together even when they were living in tawdry furnished rooms, scraping by on his assistant manager's salary. He bought a BMW, the car he had always promised himself he would drive by the time he was thirty. For four months he sailed along effortlessly, dreaming of the chain of stores that would someday be his, and then on an afternoon in autumn Oily had appeared at the store again, and this time he looked like Death indeed, unshaven, his blazer in need of ironing, sweat pouring down his face on a day when the temperature was 65 degrees.

Harry had offered him a drink, and Oily snatched at it greedily. "We got problems, partner. Bigger than you ever thought. I'm here to warn you."

"There's nothing you and I can't work through together," Harry said, full of the confidence that 28,000 unearned dollars had given him. "I'm not worried."

"Then you better get worried, partner. Unless you've had some experience I haven't heard about."

"Experience doing what?"

"Standing off the FBI."

An object slimy as a dead octopus sank through Harry's stomach.

Oily went on: "You know we've been playing with some pretty tough customers, don't you, Harry?"

Harry nodded, his face numb.

"Then you'd better keep your mouth shut, no matter who comes to see you, no matter what they ask. If you don't, we're both dead men, and I mean coffin-dead, not just business-dead or play-dead. Understand me?"

Harry nodded again.

"Keep your mouth shut. That's all." And putting aside the whiskey glass, still sweating, Oily walked out of the store, into oblivion; Harry found out later that he disappeared that same afternoon. His body was discovered in the trunk of a stolen car parked at the airport a week later.

NOW, LEFT IN HIS STORE MINUTES AFTER OILY'S DEPARTURE, Harry found himself victimized by relentless dread. He kept furtive watch of cars on the street, pedestrians walking past. He eyed every unfamiliar customer who came inside, and when he drove home, he had to circle the block three times before he could muster the courage to turn in his driveway. But what happened when he walked into his house was worse than anything he could have imagined: Jennifer sat curled on the sofa, weeping violently, more hopeless than he had ever seen her. "Harry, why didn't you let me know?"

"Know what? What's going on?" Even now, when she so obviously had found out what he had been doing, he tried to keep up the charade.

"Three men were here today. FBI agents saying they were investigating an—an organized crime money-laundering scheme."

"So?"

"I sent them away. But they said they'd be back, because you were part of it. Oh Harry, is it true?"

"Of course not, Jenny. Of course not." But suddenly he was

crying himself, bawling like an infant at the mess he had made of his life, and even more, at the mess he had made of Jennifer's life, Jennifer, the one thing most precious to him in the whole festering tangle they call the world, the only thing he really cared for.

She saw through his lies immediately. "It's true, isn't it?" Her brown eyes were filled with pain.

"Jenny, you know I'd never do anything like that—"

"Then why are you so upset? Where did the money come from to buy our new car?" Her eyes were pitying, loving. "Oh Harry, why didn't you tell me?"

"But I didn't *do* anything—"

"There's only one way to make it better. You have to confess. You have to help the FBI."

"I've got nothing to say to them." He spoke soothing words, told her there was a mistake, a huge miscalculation that he would solve tomorrow with a simple phone call to the FBI office downtown. Gradually she pretended to be won over, to believe him—though he was convinced she didn't, not really—and all the time her words sounded over and over in his head *You have to confess, you have to help the FBI* but he pushed them away. When he had finally worked up enough false cheer, he insisted that she forget about cooking dinner, they would go out tonight, Totino's, her favorite restaurant, where they would forget about the bungling minions of the federal government. So they had climbed into the BMW he was so proud of and cruised off for an evening out, and Harry had been so preoccupied with Jennifer, with every look that played across her lovely face, that he had failed to keep his eye on the rearview mirror, failed to see the drab panel truck pulling up next to them at the stoplight until it was too late. Too late for Jennifer, that is.

Harry Hicks caught sight of the shining gunbarrel and flung himself sideways, so that Jennifer absorbed the entire ten-shot fusillade herself. Before his stricken eyes she became a ragdoll, an object as meaningless as the shattered windshield, the torn upholstery of their expensive car, and when the panel truck had sped off, when Harry sat up and the full horror of what happened was borne in on him, he was out of the wreck before he knew it, dashing down the street screaming, plunging into the darkness that had enveloped him ever since, the darkness that had made him a wandering drifter for the last three months, the darkness that even now hovered outside the WFNR studios.

You have to confess, you have to help the FBI. But he was terrified of what would happen to him if he did . . .

HE HIT THE MIKE SWITCH: "IT'S 1:57 IN WINONA WITH THE snow coming down, five inches expected by daylight, and there's time for just one more song before signoff, so take a listen and tune in when WFNR comes on again at 5:30 in the a.m. Goodnight, folks."

Harry Hicks spun the last disc and found the clipboard to start the signoff checklist, the ritual for closing down the station. This was the worst part of his shift, these thirty empty minutes alone in the studio in the dead of night, the wind battering the outside walls, when he was without even the spurious comfort of the cheap music he'd played for the last six hours. It was now that he thought of the faceless men back home who desired his death, who toiled patiently to find where he had gone so they could speed their gunmen after him, who dialed phones and drove cars and cleaned weapons, spinning their web tirelessly in the darkness. And it was now when Jennifer seemed closest, when she seemed to hover over his shoulder, just out of sight, and he longed to turn and embrace her but dreaded beyond words the blood-spattered nightmare he knew would face him if he tried. Signoff time was a time to be rushed through, so he could put on his coat and climb into his wreck of a used car and go scuttling back to his barren room for a few hours of semi-conscious rest before he had to get back to his job again.

So, trying not to think, he began working his way down the clipboard. He changed the tapes on the two revoxes, check. He reset the teletype on single-space, check. He picked out the commercial cartridges for the first two hours of programming tomorrow and happened to glance out the frosted windows into the bizzard—

The BMW that had driven past the studio two hours ago was just pulling into the lot outside.

Harry Hicks paused, riveted to the floor. What could anybody want here at this hour, in this weather? As he watched, blood turning cool, then cold, then icy, the BMW's driver got out and strode toward the station door, out of Harry's line of sight. But the lightbulb above the control panel winked on, then off, meaning he'd rung the doorbell.

Harry Hicks stood frozen, not knowing what to do. What—what if they had found him?

The lightbulb blinked ON—OFF another time.

WHAT THE HECK, THOUGHT HARRY HICKS. THE GUY WAS probably lost or something, asking directions. Stop standing here like a coward; go and answer the door. They couldn't have found him anyway.

But as he walked out of the studio, into the foyer, he still congratulated himself for locking the door at the beginning of his shift.

And he silently thanked the studio's owners for the door's massive oak construction, the peephole and intercom that would enable him to talk with the driver without actually having to open it. It was the only entrance to the station, well-fortified against thieves.

First he checked the judas hole. A big-shouldered stranger in a plaid hunting coat and watchcap waited patiently under the outside light as the snow swirled down around him. Distorted by the fisheye lens, his heavy jaw bulged toward Harry Hicks. Except for his size, he seemed harmless enough, even stupid-looking. Harry Hicks thumbed the intercom.

"Can I help you?"

Watchcap's voice sounded politely through the intercom: "I'm having some engine trouble. I'd like to call my wife."

"There's a gas station down the road," Harry Hicks told him. "Open all night."

"I've been there already. They must have closed early because of the storm."

"It's only about three miles to town."

"The engine's kicking bad. I don't think I'd make it."

"What's the number? I'll call her myself."

"Come on, friend, give me a break. It's freezing out here."

There was a note of hurt reason in the stranger's voice, and when Harry Hicks surveyed him through the peephole his posture exuded dignity, good-will. Harry Hicks shrugged and reached for the door.

But something stopped him. Maybe it was the memory of the sales pitch for his own BMW, how it almost never broke down, or maybe it was just the thought of the driver of so elegant a car should be better-dressed. Or maybe it was simple fear.

In any case, he punched the intercom, "Hold on just a second," and strode back into the studio before the stranger had an opportunity to answer. A quick phone call to the station down the road would solve this. He lifted the receiver, started to dial. He was halfway through the number when he realized something was missing; something that should have happened had not happened.

There was no dial tone.

From his foyer he could hear the metallic crackle of the intercom as the stranger demanded to be let inside.

Harry's blood raced as he recradled the phone. He lifted it to his ear, expecting to hear the familiar buzz, but there was nothing but silence, deadness. He tapped the prongs, struggling to remain calm, and still nothing happened; he banged the phone down and snatched it back to

his ear, waiting for the dull whine that would prove that all his fears were stupid, all his nerves were idiotic.

The receiver stayed silent, dead, soundless.

Outside, the stranger was yelling. Harry Hicks could make out his voice even without the intercom, a coarse bellow that sounded above the moaning of the wind. He stared at the lifeless phone. Maybe it was the blizzard, he reasoned; maybe it had brought down some wires and disabled the circuit. Maybe the crews were already working on it, and in another five seconds he would hear that cheerful, familiar sound of the dial tone, the sound he wanted to hear more than anything else in the world.

Outside, the stranger was pounding on the entrance. Harry Hicks could see the heavy door rattling and shaking on its sturdy hinges.

What was he going to do? What was he going to do?

Abruptly the pounding ceased.

THE SILENCE STRETCHED OUT, FIVE SECONDS, TEN, while the wind howled and snowflakes tap-tapped against the windows. Fifteen seconds, twenty. Holding his breath, Harry Hicks let himself begin to hope. Maybe the guy was going away, maybe he was leaving right now. Maybe he was walking back to his car, getting in, starting the engine, so that Harry would be able to watch him drive away and finish his work and go scooting back to his rented room. Twenty-five seconds. Thirty. Staring at the inside face of the door, he strained for the sound of the engine—

Again the door rattled on its hinges, and Harry Hicks was just telling himself that that seemed strange, because there had been no knocks, no pounding, when he noticed that the air in the foyer seemed to be full of some sort of dust that hadn't been there a second ago, and his eyes swung back to the surface of the door above the knob. He was just in time to see the wood face ripped apart, a splintered hole appearing in it, and now Harry saw that that there were two of them, two holes and *oh heaven sweet heaven* the stranger had a gun with a silencer and he was shooting his way inside; the killer had come for him at last.

Now the door was shivering on its hinges as the killer with the watchcap kicked it from the outside, and Harry Hicks could see the shattered wood giving way as the heavy door buckled inwards. He knew he had perhaps half a minute before the murderer broke inside, and without even thinking about it he dove for the lightswitch, knowing he had to find a place to hide, and his only slender advantage was his knowledge of the station's layout. In blackness maybe he'd have more of a chance, even if it didn't last long, even if the killer turned the lights

back on right away, and a moment later Harry Hicks killed the lights in the foyer and studio and dashed to the basement door, the basement because it was full of places to hide and he knew the killer would have a problem searching it.

He stood on the first step down, the door open a crack, huddled in darkness that seemed thick as black velvet, listening to the stranger's pounding and his own thundering heart and the blizzard wind as it walloped the eaves in successive battering gusts, wishing he'd never heard of WFNR, never read that stupid no-experience-necessary ad that had led him to this deathtrap in the snow, which—

CRAAAACK!

Oh sweet heaven here he comes.

The door had given way at last, the interior walls crunching as the air pressure equalized with the outside. He could imagine the killer stepping carefully into the foyer, looking around, gun poised, and—

"Hicks."

Harry couldn't believe his ears, but he'd heard it distinctly, heard the killer's voice.

"Hicks, I'm coming to get you, Hicks."

At the sound of his name, a paroxysm of terror clutched Harry's shoulders, shook his biceps and forearms. His chest and stomach convulsed in a heaving spasm, and the brassy taste of nausea filled his mouth as he steadied himself against the doorframe, trying to control the knocking heart that seemed to be hammering through his chestbone, the blood that thundered to his head until he felt it would explode. Good Lord, he had to think, he needed time—

"I'm coming now, Hicks. I'm coming to get you."

—and oh sweet heaven, death itself was a few feet away and coming to get him.

A STAR EXPLODED IN HARRY HICKS' BRAIN, A NOVA OF terror that sent its flaming particles shooting into every portion of his body, and suddenly he was in a panicky flight, pulling shut the basement door, plunging down the stairs. He slammed to a halt against the basement wall, behind one of the piles of cardboard boxes that were stacked down here, his chest heaving, an icy draft chilling his sweaty face, looking wildly around for an exit, a way out. There must be a window at least, maybe even steps and a cellar door, but he'd only been down here once in his three weeks at the station and he wasn't sure where they might be positioned, and then he knew with dead certainty that there were none, there was no escape, just the black interior of the basement with the heaps of boxes jammed and packed into every

square inch, and here he'd wait like a condemned man in a cell until the killer and *oh dear Lord* up above he could hear the joists creaking as the stranger moved out of the foyer, into the main studio, coming to find him, coming to kill him . . .

The squeaking paused. It halted for three heartbeats as if the killer was looking around, then creaked another two or three tentative steps. Watchcap was being thorough, searching carefully from room to room, but Harry Hicks was willing to bet that he never let himself go more than a few steps from the entrance door.

How long have I got?

Again the creaking halted, directly above his head now. The murderer was in the newsroom, and Harry Hicks counted, sweated, trying to figure how many more rooms the stranger had to go through before he came to the basement door. There was the commercial production studio and the program director's office, and alongside *that* were the basement stairs and good Lord that couldn't take much longer, five minutes at the most, and he had to find a way out—

The joists creaked again. Watchcap was leaving the newsroom. Straining, Harry Hicks caught the scree of an opening door as the stranger moved into the production studio and *how was he going to find an exit?* Again a cold draft touched his face as he looked around, searching for a way out, there must be something, his skin tightening under the touch of icy air *a cold draft* and now at last he'd noticed it and made the connection, and *sweet heaven thank you thank you* there was a way out after all—

HE SCUTTLED BETWEEN HEAPS OF BOXES. THE DRAFT seemed to be coming from the corner, filtering through the piles of cardboard, and as he squeezed between the stacks he felt it blowing colder and fresher on his skin. A pinpoint of icy cold landed on his cheek and he wiped it off, certain it was snow, and then he could see the window, high up near the ceiling, letting in a spoonful of light. It was almost buried behind the cardboard boxes, and it was frosted with ice, but there it was, individual snowflakes leaking in around the edges, and the freedom of the outside was just inches away.

Was it frozen shut? Could he get it open?

Up above he heard the killer's footsteps as he searched the program director's office.

Harry knew he had to rush. He hoisted himself up the stack of perilously-swaying boxes and felt the edges of the window. The cold glass stung his naked fingers as he searched for the latches, and then he located them, one on each of the top corners, and wrenched them

down, gashing his hand. The window screeched and opened a crack, and particles of snow swarmed up his nostrils. A gush of icy air swept over him as he lifted it off its hinges. Snow drifted inwards, and then he was heaving himself through the hole, squirming and twisting while handfuls of snow slid down his sleeves and collar, catching in his hair. He burrowed into it like a puppy, his head popping clear, then his shoulders, and he was almost through, almost free, gulping that stinging icy air when *dear sweet Lord* suddenly he was stuck, half in and half out, unable to go any farther, his trousers snagged on the frame.

What will I do? How can I get free?

He fought down the panic that rose in his throat, the wrenching fear *what's the killer doing, it can't be long before he finds the basement door* wriggling his upper body, pushing with his feet. But he wouldn't budge. The panic grew as he continued to struggle, and he felt the sweat running down his face, snow melting in it, the waves of shivering that convulsed him until he wanted to be sick. He'd nearly given up, he was nearly crying, and then he gave one last spasmodic kick and something tore loose, his hips came free, his legs, and then Harry Hicks was out, shivering, stumbling to his feet in a snowdrift, starting to run against the sweeping power of the wind. He ran across the farmfield in terror and joy, knee-deep in snow, weeping now because he was a long way from safe but at least he wouldn't die like a rat, cowering against the basement wall, dreading the sound of footsteps coming downstairs, and then he tripped and fell face-down in a drift.

He raised his head and looked around. The radio station was a dark smudge fifty yards distant, and the silver lamp on the telephone pole across the road wore a fuzzy crown of flying snow. He had to get moving; the nearest house was at least a mile away, but as he started to push himself out of the drift he realized his left hand was slow to respond. It was already going numb, he was losing feeling in it, and in panic he gave a convulsive shove and was on his feet. He took a lurching stride as snow filled his shoes, then another, and he was about to stagger off in the direction of the farmhouse when he paused, because suddenly he knew he'd never make it on a night like this. He had no coat, no boots, and he would have to travel against the wind. Even if he made it, there was no guarantee that anybody was home. Just last week a drunk had died of exposure after locking himself out of his trailer, and suddenly Harry Hicks knew that if he tried to make the farmhouse tonight his body wouldn't be found until spring, frozen stiff in the middle of a field, the buzzards circling as his carcass thawed out.

But if I can't walk, that means—that means—

He would have to get to his car.

No oh no.

HE LOOKED BACK AT THE STUDIO. HE'D PARKED IN HIS usual spot, in the lee of the building so he couldn't see his auto from here. But it was his only escape tonight, the only way to save his life, and *What if I lost the keys?*

He kept them in his left-side pants pocket, and he fumbled with his numb hand, knowing they could easily have fallen out in all his squirming and running, and then he was using his right hand awkwardly and thank heaven they were there. He grasped them, hesitating *What if the car won't start? What if he hears me?* but an icy gust of wind sent snow needling into the back of his neck and spurred him into action. He made a wide circle around the station, straining his eyes for a glimpse of the killer through the darkened windows. But there was nothing but the studio huddling black and menacing, a plume of white snow billowing off the roof, and then he could see his car next to the killer's BMW, both of them partly buried in a drift, shimmering under the glow of the station's outside light. Sixty yards away.

He hesitated, but he couldn't wait; he started forward.

The wind battered him, shoved him sideways, and snakes of snow hissed through the drifts at his feet as he scuttled toward his car under its sheen of light. If only he hadn't parked there, if only he'd parked in the shadows where Watchcap couldn't just just look out a window to spot him. The car was thirty yards away, then twenty, and then he was bellying up to the station wall, ten yards away from his auto, ducking below a window and risking a look around the corner. He could hear the shattered entrance door banging back and forth occasionally. Watchcap had never shut it. But there was no other sign that anything was wrong at WFNR, *this is it* and he held the keys in his teeth and rubbed his hands together, trying to get the circulation going, trying to control their shaking. *This is it.*

Harry Hicks summoned his nerve and ran five crouching steps to the BMW. He squatted, shivering, snow swirling up in his face as he popped another look at the studio door. Still nothing, and he ducked over to his own car, a battered Chevy he'd bought at a used car lot a month ago. It had been cheap, and it ran well enough, but lately he'd had trouble getting it to start on cold days, and he'd never imagined that he would have to use it as a getaway car, his only hope of escape in a howling icy wilderness. He stole along the rear fender, hardly

breathing. The door handle was caked with snow, but he brushed it away, individual particles swimming into his tearing eyes. Then he opened the door and hustled into the driver's seat. He put the key in the ignition.

A glance through the windshield showed the radio station swirling with snow, the entrance door yawning wide, then swinging back *got to do it* and Harry Hicks pumped the accelerator and turned the ignition. The old starter ground over and over again.

But the engine didn't fire.

Again he turned the key, again the starter cranked but the engine didn't catch, and now Harry Hicks was sweating once more, the perspiration pouring down his face, fogging the inside of the windshield as he struggled not to lose his nerve. *How long would it take to start, how long before the killer—*

He turned the key another time and the starter responded more feebly, turning over a few times, losing its charge. Harry Hicks was trembling now, barely able to control his shaking hands, and he shot a glance toward the station, dreading what he would see, when abruptly the outside light beside the entrance went off, and the afterimage printed on his staring retinas showed the white smudge of the killer's face just inside the door, and Watchcap was smiling, grinning with satisfaction. Harry Hicks froze, staring into the blackness as a dark form took shape outside the yawning door, a shape that moved deliberately in front of the Chevy and raised its elongated right arm, and he knew that finally it was coming, finally after all the running and flight the only thing left to do was die, and he braced for the impact of the bullets that would rip through his chest and lungs—

But he couldn't just sit there, and in despair he turned the starter, went for the headlights.

IT ALL HAPPENED AT ONCE, THE LIGHTS BLAZING ON, casting the big-shouldered killer in their blinding glare, the windshield exploding inward, stinging Harry's face with tiny slivers of glass as the silenced pistol bucked in the stranger's hand. Harry Hicks could see the killer recoiling from the blaze of light as if from a physical blow and knew the stranger wouldn't miss again, but simultaneously the Chevy's grinding engine caught, Harry gunning the accelerator, the motor racing up and up, and then he reached for the gearshift, panicking, and slammed it into drive. The car leaped forward, the stranger pinned like a moth in the glare of its headlights, and Harry Hicks saw him lifted by the Chevy's hood and hurled back against the building, the long-barreled pistol flying from his hand. The brick wall of the station flew

towards the windshield, bricks buckling inward as the car's nose rammed it, everything disappearing as the Chevy's hood buckled upwards, blocking his view. Harry Hicks banged his head on the steering wheel, and then he was sitting in a wrecked car, still flooring an accelerator that pumped gas to a mangled, clicking engine.

The wind roared thunderously, sending a gust of snow prickling into the driver's side window.

Oh Lord, I think, I think—

Dazed, he staggered from the car and stumbled around to where Watchcap lay crushed against the station wall. But he couldn't force himself to look at what the car had done. The stranger was dead; that was enough. He picked up the silenced pistol from where it lay in the snow and threw it with all his strength into the farmfield. The effort made him dizzy. Then he was plunging back through the flapping entrance to the station, wrenching open the closet door, ripping his winter coat off its hanger, fumbling into it. The sudden warmth was godsent. Then he stopped, hand still on the doorknob.

What'll I do now?

His car was wrecked, the stranger was dead, and the snow was billowing down. If he waited for the police there would be questions to answer, questions about who Watchcap was and why he had come here tonight, questions Harry Hicks knew he couldn't answer. *But what else can I do, WHAT?*

The BMW stood silent in the parking lot, undamaged, collecting snow.

He ran to where the killer lay. Luckily he found the keys after searching only two pockets. He jogged to the German car, got inside. The engine started on the first try. He maneuvered out of the lot, careful to avoid the drifts and yawning ditches. He turned right onto the road, away from town, away from his cramped little room in the cheap boarding house, gunning into the night, bound for—where?

Oh Lord oh dear heaven help me, what should I do, where should I go now?

But the fuel tank was almost full. As the blizzard whipped snow around the car and screamed like all the world's lost souls come back to haunt him, Harry Hicks drove on through the night, checking the mirror for drab panel trucks and knowing that if he turned his head Jennifer would be sitting in the right-hand seat, pleading with him to call the FBI, watching him with tender brown eyes that shown between the throbbing channels of blood.

Times were tough, all right. A man could be murdered for a few dollars or for an opportunity. And there was a corpse on the floor to prove it!

These Hard Times

by JERRY JACOBSON

THE DEAD MAN'S BODY HAD BEEN FOUND IN A SECTION OF the city called Highpoint, a knoll of land so named only by virtue of its height above the city-proper, and not for any good fortune or promise its residents ever enjoyed. They lived there jammed together in shabby, claustrophobic duplex units now designated by the city as public housing. As they were in every slum neighborhood in every city in the country, they were more often referred to as The Projects. Medic One ambulances screamed there in a constant stream to deal with the damaged remains of domestic disputes or petty arguments over money or women. Cabbies refused to take fares to The Projects, or to pick them up there either. Welfare workers entered only when it was necessary or urgent, and homicide detectives had no choice at all.

This one would be Rakestraw's third homicide in The Projects this year. The last had been over a cast iron frying pan. A welfare mother named Sally Oroniz had turned it into a murder weapon when a female neighbor had stormed over to her duplex to claim ownership of the frying pan and to demand its immediate return. In fact, the frying pan had been borrowed and loaned so many times over the years, its ownership remained a mystery even after the killing. The pan may even have been Sally Oroniz' to begin with but, as with a pistol, its ownership paled as an issue in the face of the fact that it had used it as a deadly weapon.

Murder always made perfect sense to the people who did it.

ALL THE STREETS IN HIGHPOINT RAN IN CONCENTRIC CIRCLES and were named after trees. Oak Street, Ash Street, Sycamore

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Street. When the housing project was opened in 1961 the trees around the duplex units were as thick as in a national forest; but over the years the residents cut them down under the cover of darkness to use as firewood to reduce their gas and electric bills, so that now jagged stumps outnumbered the living trees by at least ten-to-one.

Rakestraw was looking for 1218 Walnut Street. As with all his other visits to The Project, he found it entirely by accident. Spinning off one circle and into another eventually brought you onto every street in Highpoint. All one had to keep in mind was the variety of tree you were looking for and not panic when you began to sense you might be going in a single circle.

A block ahead, Rakestraw picked out a small knot of people milling about on a small patch of parched grass. Small children were peering in the windows of a patrol unit parked at the curb, while its uniformed officer stood guard at the open door of the duplex unit to restrain the onlookers from entry.

As he went up the walk no one paid him much attention. Their attitude toward him, Rakestraw knew, was not so much indifference as it was avoidance. In The Projects, you learned quickly that a visitor wearing a dark suit and driving a vehicle with city license plates almost never came bearing good news or medals or sudden windfalls or anything else that was fortunate.

The patrol officer's nameplate read S. WILLAMETTE and although Rakestraw could not place him, his dour expression said he was newly assigned to The Projects and doing penance here for some manner of official infraction. Everyone in the division knew an assignment to The Projects was a punishment and not a promotion (Rakestraw included) and so it went without mentioning or rubbing in.

Willamette spent a moment peering at the detective's shield clipped to the outer pocket of Rakestraw's suitcoat. "The deceased is inside the unit, lieutenant. On the living room floor. Stab wounds in the chest, slashes on both arms where he tried to defend himself from the assailant. His name's Otto Kerchen, WMA, about fifty years, a resident here at The Projects for roughly ten months."

"About and roughly, huh, Willamette? No exactly? No precisely? Where's your notebook?"

The patrol officer smirked a thin smile and tapped his temple. "All up here, sir. I have nearly a photographic memory."

"About, roughly and nearly. Willamette, get a notebook by tomorrow morning. The next time we speak, I want you to be reading from text and not speaking off the top of your head."

The smirk vanished. "Yes, sir."

"Now let's go inside and have a look at this *roughly* fifty-year-old decedent who's lived here at The Projects for *about* ten months."

THE BODY LAY FACE-UP IN THE CENTER OF THE LIVING room. A decrepit coffee table had been toppled on its side. Either the dead man or his killer had fallen across it; or it had been simply upended in a struggle. The body was dressed in dark-blue coveralls, the material punctured in several places in its upper torso and slashed on both sleeves. Rakestraw glanced about in search of the murder weapon, a cursory thing he always did before examining the body or the scene. A knife of some sort; there was little doubt of that. But for the moment, he saw no evidence of it.

"There was a witness, lieutenant," said the patrolman from behind Rakestraw as the latter knelt to determine whether the chest wounds were punctures or elongations.

"A witness to the killing?"

"Well, a witness to the killer anyway, sir. She claims the decedent spoke his name before he died. A Mrs. Angela Mott. She lives in the other half of the duplex. Welfare mother. She was feeding lunch to her kids and thought she heard an argument and two men struggling."

"And she went next door?"

"Well, not right away, sir. You know The Projects. You butt in on somebody else's business here and you're liable to be the first casualty. But a little later, she thought she heard the decedent cry out in pain. She found him on the floor in the living room, just where he is now, ran back to her own duplex and called the cops."

"Is she outside now?"

"Yes, sir."

Rakestraw took out his own note pad and a ballpoint and handed them to the patrol officer. "All right. Send her in to me. Then take down the names and addresses of anyone else out there who saw or heard anything, or has anything they want to get off their chests about Mr. Kerchen or anything else. Then pack all those kids into your patrol unit and take them down to the superette for some ice cream. That should disperse them good enough. Then, come back here with those names and addresses. *And my ballpoint.*"

"You got it."

In the bedroom, Rakestraw retrieved a blanket and found what likely was the dead man's wallet on the top of a four-drawer dresser. He put the wallet into a pocket of his suitcoat and then went back to the living

room and covered the body with the blanket.

A heavyset woman was standing in the doorway of the duplex. Two small children were clinging to a sausage-roll arm and peering out from behind a flowered housecoat with wide, fearful eyes.

"Are you Mrs. Mott?" Rakestraw asked.

The large woman nodded without speaking a word.

"Is there someone out there who can watch your children while we speak for a minute?"

Again the woman nodded in silence. She disappeared. In a minute she was back without her children. She could not keep her eyes from the lump beneath the blanket.

"Would it be better for you if we spoke outside?" Rakestraw said.

"Better," the woman spoke softly.

Rakestraw walked out onto the stoop and closed the door behind him. He allowed a minute or two to hang in the muggy, summer air as an oasis of silence so the woman could calm and collect her thoughts. The crowd had broken and gone to their homes. They were completely alone.

"Mrs. Mott, you told the patrol officer you heard Mr. Kerchen speak the name of the man who assaulted him."

"Well," the woman hedged now, her heavily tinted eyelids batting like frightened birds taking flight, "I don't know if I should get involved now."

"Mrs. Mott, you *are* involved. Make no mistake of that. You heard something that could lead to the identification of a killer. Now, that's about as involved as anyone can get."

"Would I be in trouble if I said I didn't want to get involved?" the woman said.

"You could be, yes," Rakestraw said firmly. "You could be charged with withholding evidence in a criminal investigation. You could also be cited for obstructing justice, even the aiding and abetting of a criminal or a crime. Do you know what the word 'abetting' means?"

"I'm not sure, no."

"It means that you've encouraged, supported, or countenanced by your aid or approval a wrong doing. In this case, a criminal act. Whether you like it or not, Mrs. Mott, you are socially obligated to help. *Legally* obligated."

"It's a *law*?"

"I'm afraid it is, Mrs. Mott."

"And I could be arrested?"

"You could be arrested, yes."

The woman's eyeballs slid from side to side in their sockets like someone alert for spies. "There was an argument," the woman began. "Otto and another man."

"Not a woman," said Rakestraw.

"No. Two men."

"And you didn't recognize the voice of the other man?"

"No," said Angela Mott. "But Otto spoke his name before he died. He said it was someone named Manuel."

"Did Mr. Kerchen say Manuel's last name?"

"No. Just Manuel."

"Think carefully, Mrs. Mott. Do you know anyone living in The Project named Manuel?"

The woman took her time. "No, I know no one by that name. He could be someone new. You know The Projects. People move in and out like they was going through a revolving door at the department store. They can't pay their rent, or they get into trouble, or someone who's chasing after them finds them."

"Yes, I know," said Rakestraw. The project manager's office, he knew, was housed in the first duplex inside the entrance to The Projects. Numbering and locating all the males named Manuel living in The Project would not be difficult.

He had only one more question for the woman. "Mrs. Mott, did you see anyone running from Mr. Kerchen's duplex after you heard the argument? Or did you see a car speeding away? Or simply *driving* away, at *any* speed?"

"No. No one running and no one driving."

Another question struck Rakestraw, although considering The Projects he thought he knew the answer already. "Did Mr. Kerchen work? Did he have a job of any sort?"

The woman's laugh was grating and derisive, like a bow drawn badly across the strings of a violin. "In The Projects? Mister, anybody in The Projects has a job and he keeps it a secret, because somebody here will find a way to steal *that* from you, too."

There was no point going on with any other questions. Rakestraw thanked the woman for her cooperation and told her she could collect her children and return home.

RAKESTRAW SPENT THE NEXT TEN MINUTES SEARCHING the dead man's room for a murder weapon, but no bloodied knife turned up. He checked the contents of the wallet he'd found on the dresser in the bedroom. A driver's license and social security card substantiated

that the wallet belonged to Otto Kerchen. It contained forty-two dollars in currency, so either robbery could be ruled out as a motive, or a potential robber had botched his robbery with a killing and without scouring the unit for valuables had fled in panic.

The patrol officer had meanwhile returned to tell Rakestraw the ice cream had cost three dollars and change. The detective gave him a five and reminded himself to submit a voucher for what they called street money.

"Here's your notepad, lieutenant. *And* your pen."

"Run out of ink, Willamette?" The topmost page in the open notepad was blank.

"Ran out of cooperation. You know how it is here in The Projects, lieutenant. Nobody sees or hears anything that isn't their own business. People learn you're a snitch or you can't be trusted with a secret, they begin avoiding you, or they just burn your unit down to the foundation."

"All right."

"Anything else, sir?"

"Check the grounds around both units of this duplex and all the trash cans out back and the yards all the way back to the fencing. We're looking for a bloodied knife or some similar weapon. When the tech team shows up, tell them Rakestraw is the investigating detective and I'd like all the paperwork on this on my desk as soon as it's feasible. And I want a rundown on the work coveralls the decedent is wearing. They look old. I want brand name, material, laundry marks, foreign matter, hair samples. It may turn up something, it may turn up nothing."

"No turn unstoned, eh, lieutenant?"

"Tell them when they're finished they can seal off the unit. I won't be back today. Then, hit it back on patrol."

"Right-o."

"And Willamette?"

"Sir?"

"I'm going to get back to you on that notepad."

The patrol officer smiled weakly. "Figured you would, sir."

RAKESTRAW, ON HIS WAY TO HIS CAR, COULD SENSE THE heat of the day coming on now. It was not yet noon and still he could feel its oppression pushing against him on all sides like an unruly crowd. People who worked outside would be swearing up at the sun before this day was out.

The manager of the Highpoint Housing Project was out of the office. A slim, black girl in a chic, beige business suit greeted Rakestraw affably, nodded crisply at his credentials and led him into a small, inner office.

She spared Rakestraw some time. "I already know of Mr. Kerchen's death, lieutenant. The Highpoint grapevine. Compared to it, light travels at the speed of a snail."

"Can you tell me where I might find Mr. Conyers?" Rakestraw said.

"That is a good question, lieutenant. I presume he is taking care of some business out in The Project somewhere, but there's no telling where. He neglected to fill in the sign-out log. That's very uncharacteristic of Mr. Conyers. He's retired Army. Korea. Everything by the book."

"Except for today."

"I'm sure it's just an oversight."

"Well," said Rakestraw, "we should never be too sure about anything."

"Is there something specific I can do for you in Mr. Conyers' absence, lieutenant?"

"As it turns out, there is. I need the last names and addresses of everyone living in Highpoint whose first name is Manuel."

The girl flashed a perplexed look. "Well, we don't crossfile and we've been screaming for a computer for months now, so it might take me a little time."

"I can wait," Rakestraw told her.

"My files are in the other room. You must keep in mind, there'll be no records on the move-ins and believe me, we have armies of them. Your Manuel could be one of those and if he is, he'll more than likely slip through the cracks."

"I understand."

"Just be a few minutes, lieutenant." Ten minutes, that was all. And his request was reduced to the simplest of choices.

"Just one, lieutenant. His name is Manuel Comforta. He lives on Eucalyptus Street. Come here and I'll show you."

The woman moved to a large street map tacked to a wall. She pointed out the scene of the crime and then—the home of Manuel Comforta on Eucalyptus Street. The two duplexes were on opposite sides of Highpoint, which did not make it a crime of easy opportunity for Comforta. If he had not driven to Otto Kerchen's home, he would have had to walk a maze of streets to and from the scene. In bright daylight, he surely would have passed dozens of Highpoint residents along the

way, any of whom would have noted his passing and remembered it.

And if he had driven and not walked and his car was well-known, there doubtless would be witnesses to that as well.

Rakestraw asked the young woman if Manuel Comforta lived alone.

"He had a girlfriend living there. But that was some time ago. They fought and she left. He works at the Giant Elephant Car Wash in town. When he works. From what I know, he has a mean temper. If I were you, I wouldn't rush up and throw my arms around him."

"If I throw anything around him," said Rakestraw, "it will be a pair of handcuffs."

THE CAR PARKED IN FRONT OF 3112 EUCALYPTUS STREET was a relic Dodge whose body looked as though it had been kicked and sledgehammered at least once a week for the past ten years. As he passed it on the way to the front porch, Rakestraw swept a palm slowly across its hood. Shaded by one of the few eucalyptus trees on the block, any heat on the hood would have come from an engine still warm from recent use. But the hood was cool.

Manuel Comforta's muscled upper torso said he'd invested some time wrestling or hoisting weights. And his piercing dark eyes said he might have been in a street-fight or two and not to mess with him.

"The cops? Sure, come on in. She's making trouble for me again, I suppose."

"Who's making trouble again, Mr. Comforta?" Rakestraw said.

"Lucinda. She used to live here. Until they laid me off at the car wash and I took a little money from her. I know a couple trainers at the tracks and I figured to hit a few parlays. I sold her stereo, too, I admit it. And now she's using the cops to get her money back, right?"

"Bad debts are civil matters, Mr. Comforta. And we aren't collection agents."

"So what's it about, then?"

"Do you know a Highpoint resident named Otto Kerchen?" Rakestraw asked.

"The name is news to me," Comforta answered.

Rakestraw glanced past Manuel Comforta's bulky shoulders toward the kitchen. "Mr. Comforta, would you mind if I stepped into your kitchen a moment?"

The black eyes hooded. "What for? You hungry? You want a sandwich? I can bring you out something."

"Obtaining a warrant won't take much time or trouble," Rakestraw said.

For a moment, Manuel Comforta seemed to consider what he could gain or lose by being difficult.

He decided not to be difficult.

"This way to the kitchen," he said.

Rakestraw spotted it almost immediately: the wooden cutlery rack affixed to the wall next to the sink. Four knives slotted in their proper places, one knife conspicuously missing.

For a moment Rakestraw stared into a sink that was loaded with dirty dishes and pots, the bachelor's eternal malaise. Murky water covered everything but the protruding handles of the pots.

Bachelor's malaise, or killer's clever ruse?

"Mr. Comforta, I notice there's a knife missing from your cutlery rack."

"Oh, yeah? Well, it's around somewhere."

"In that sink, maybe? Suppose we drain it and see."

Comforta shrugged and plunged a hand into the greasy water, pulled the drain plug and the waters began to recede. It was slow going. The whole project was likely a plumber's nightmare.

When the sink was empty, Comforta removed the pots and began searching for the knife. He seemed to be borrowing time.

"Not there?" said Rakestraw.

"Everything is somewhere, lieutenant. What's the big deal over a kitchen knife, anyway?"

It had been Rakestraw's experience that one thing that was almost never found anywhere but where it belonged was a kitchen knife. Socks could be found in a bathroom and garden shears could turn up at a neighbor's; but a kitchen knife rarely wandered from a kitchen. They were almost never lost and they were almost never thrown out.

"You didn't answer my question," Comforta was repeating. "What's the big deal over this knife I can't find?"

"Nothing much, Mr. Comforta. I see from their handles that the knives are a matched set. Scrolled in ivory, with three small dots in each side."

"All the same, right."

Rakestraw would have to stop back for another visit with Angela Mott, because he had neglected to ask her one very important question.

Comforta did not strike Rakestraw as a stupid man, at least not so stupid he would use such a distinctive knife to kill someone.

"Were you away at work this morning, Mr. Comforta?"

The laugh was a second bow being raked indiscriminately across the strings of a violin.

"I guess you've been living at the back of a cave lately and haven't heard about the city's twenty-two percent unemployment rate," said Comforta. "They lay off aircraft workers and shipfitters . . . then they lay off car salesmen because the aircraft workers and shipfitters haven't got the cash or credit to buy new cars . . . then they lay off the guys who work in car washes because nobody's got a new car they want washed, or they get out the soapy water and sponges themselves because of the hard times. It boils down to hard times, lieutenant; it all boils down to hard times."

"Then you've been home all morning."

"Haven't left," said Comforta.

There was no way Manuel Comforta could prove that; but then, the full burden of proof lay across the back of the accuser, not the accused.

"The economy will pick up soon and you'll have your job back, Mr. Comforta," Rakestraw said as he made his own way out of the kitchen and back through the living room.

"Sure," said Comforta in a voice that was both soft and deadly. "And that delivery of ice cubes is going to reach Hell any day now. Hell and Highpoint."

RAKESTRAW DROVE BACK ACROSS THE PROJECTS. THE tech team and the people of the medical examiner's office were gone, which meant so was the corpse. Otto Kerchen's front door was sealed and posted. They'd done a quick job, but then this was going to be the kind of day when everyone wanted to get out of the heat.

The patrol unit was still there. Rakestraw took an overgrown flagstone walk around to the rear of the duplex and spotted Willamette thirty yards off in the distance, thigh-deep in unmowed grass.

"If there's a knife out here," he told Rakestraw, "it's going to take a platoon of bodies with scythes to uncover it."

"Do you think he escaped this way, Willamette?"

The patrol officer nodded emphatically. "Well, if it was me who'd done this crime, sir, I sure wouldn't have busted out the front door in the clear light of day. I'd have bolted out the back here, across the yard and over the fencing here where The Projects end. I mean, the chances of being seen in flight are pretty slim. Bedrooms and bathrooms. On the one hand, people are sleeping. On the other, their windows are fogged, or they're squatting and doing their duty."

Angela Mott, likewise, could not provide him with any additional help in this baffling murder.

"No, I didn't recognize the voice of the other man," she told him

moments later while she tried to keep separate two tiny disputants who both claimed ownership of a rag doll with only one eye. "I'm almost positive it was someone I didn't know."

Thinking to bring Manuel Comforta around to have her listen to his voice in a simulated argument through the wall of the duplex, he said, "Would you recognize his voice if you heard it again?"

"Well, they were both kind of arguing at the same time. That's how I could tell there were two voices and not just one. And with my kids hollaring and the teevee going, their voices was sort of like more noise in the madhouse, if you know what I mean."

Rakestraw said that he did and thanked her for her cooperation.

HE TRUDGED BACK TO HIS CAR FEELING ODDLY ADRIFT. He was a city police detective and he had a murder to solve. But he had no legitimate suspects, no weapon, no witnesses to the crime, and only the dead man's wallet for leads. He found it difficult convincing himself he had any real work to do.

But still and all there was the wallet. Behind the wheel of the city sedan, he took it out and first rifled through the clear-plastic compartments reserved for photographs and credit cards. Otto Kerchen, it became quickly apparent to Rakestraw, was considered a poor credit risk. He had no credit cards at all. There was the driver's license and social security card Rakestraw had come across earlier. But there were no photos of wives, or ex-wives, or parents. Indeed, there was only a single picture: that of a young man looking to be in his mid-twenties who stood with his right arm draped around the shoulder of a young boy of seven or eight. There were no notations on the reverse of the photo to identify the subjects or the year it had been taken. But the man looked vaguely like Otto Kerchen and in the boy's face Rakestraw could sense a faint family resemblance. And there was not much in the way of clues in the picture's background; only an anonymous red-brick wall against which the principals had been posed. Rakestraw suspected it to be the residence of the picture-taker, or the boy, or even Kerchen himself in former times.

Otto Kerchen had been the prototypical loner. He belonged to no clubs, no associations, no workman's unions. His lack of business cards bespoke he had no personal dentist, physician or lawyer. The fact of the latter made Rakestraw wonder whether the deceased had left a will. It was not likely. Humans who died sudden and violent deaths long before their time were never that prepared to deal with their mortality. And people like Otto Kerchen, with so pitifully little to

bequeath, even more so.

Rakestraw next searched Otto Kerchen's wallet for the ultimate lifelines: addresses and telephone numbers. These human links were sometimes stronger than those forged by birth or marriage; they were as vital and immediate as oxygen and sometimes as ephemeral as shooting stars.

Otto Kerchen, too, had his lifelines, an accumulation of small slips of paper jammed into one of the wallet's leather sleeves.

One slip showed he had been tethered to a man named Tod, who was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Another gave the address of a company called Alpha Therapeutics, which Rakestraw knew to be a blood plasma center, a place where each visit as a donor was worth eight dollars in red blood cells. A third slip of paper showed the name of Constance Dunne, who in some way was connected with the State Employment Security Division. There was no telephone number and the paper was badly wrinkled, as though it had been crumpled by an angry fist to be thrown away, and then retained.

There was just one more shard of paper. It listed the names and phone numbers of two taverns on Beacon Avenue, the main, north-south commercial avenue just beyond the entrance to Highpoint, a sad boulevard of bars, laundromats, superette-size grocery stores and second-hand shops. The Wayfarer's Tavern was a hang-out for commercial fishermen and merchant seamen. The Dew-Drop-Inn was nothing more than a refuge from the imprisonment of The Projects and collected the aged and the welfared; the New Poor young with A.A.s in English and beer schooners in front of them and the problem or morale on their minds; the streetwise street people down to their last thin dimes, and desperately searching for the next hustle.

It was the New Poor that Rakestraw worried most about, because more and more of them were moving into Highpoint all the time. They were young and better-educated and they filled hiring halls by the droves and turned up daily for breakfast at places like the Union Gospel Mission and The Lighthouse Free Church and The Millionaire Club, skilled and hungry and terrified.

And what troubled him more than their desperation was their breaking-point—when and if and how he would officially enter their lives as an inquisitor, pursuer and apprehender. How many of these young men would turn to crime? How many of the young women would resort to prostitution? For Rakestraw, what loomed was only the question of time and degree.

nection with seamen or commercial fishermen and so he bypassed The Wayfarer's Tavern and instead paid a visit to The Dew-Drop-Inn. The early-afternoon crowd was thin, but the Dew-Drop was not air-conditioned and it was the first place Unemployment Compensation field representatives checked to cancel claimants from benefits.

Rakestraw did not know the young, male bartender who served him his draught-light schooner. The owner, he knew, hired these young people by the boxful, giving them only part-time hours and paying them off the books to cut his tax payments to hard bone. Getting to know them was like getting to know the wind.

"Just a minute. Could you help me out on a matter?"

The young eyes narrowed with instant suspicion. What was *this one*, now? A welfare tracker? A private detective? A skip tracer? A vengeful ex-husband?

"That depends."

Rakestraw brought out the weathered photograph of a young Otto Kerchen and a little boy.

"Do you recognize the man in the photograph? It was taken when the man was much younger. His name is Otto Kerchen. He was killed this morning in The Projects."

"Whaddya say the name was again?"

"Kerchen. Otto Kerchen. About fifty years old. You might have seen him wearing a pair of old, workman's coveralls."

"Sorry, pal. I don't recognize the face. And most of the people in here don't have names to me. You want to get on any of the baseball pools?"

The trip was over with this one. Rakestraw smiled tightly and said he didn't gamble and let it all go at that. The bartender left and Rakestraw settled over his schooner. It was wet and icy against his throat. It was thin consolation. But it was consolation.

A bearded young man Rakestraw had noted sitting two stools down from him when he came in now disturbed the quiet volume of air between them by sliding a stool closer. He wore a peach tanktop and he was heavily tanned and there were needle tracks on his right arm.

"Man, I heard you asking about Otto," he said to Rakestraw. "I know him."

He wasn't a junkie. All serious addicts kept their arms covered even on the hottest day of the year.

"I met him at Alpha. We was getting our blood pressures checked together. That was about two months ago. He was dry as a bone for cash." The eyes averted Rakestraw's in momentary shame. "So was

I.”

“Otto was murdered this morning in The Projects,” Rakestraw told him.

“The Projects, yeah. They rob him? Man, they’ll off you for small change in The Projects and that’s a fact.”

“Did you know him very well?”

“I played shuffleboard with him in here every so often. The old guy could play pretty good. Plane geometry. Man, he could really bisect those angles. He was kind of down lately because he couldn’t find work.”

“What kind of work did he do normally?” Rakestraw asked.

“He never said. He wore those old coveralls all the time, so maybe he did some landscaping around The Projects, or carpentry or something like that. He didn’t work on cars, because there wasn’t ever any grease spots on them.”

Rakestraw showed the young man the photograph he’d taken from Kerchen’s wallet.

“That’s Otto, all right. When he was a lot younger.”

“Do you have any idea who the young boy standing with him might be?”

“Well, he mentioned to me once he had a nephew, so that could be him.”

“Did Mr. Kerchen mention his name?”

“No. Just a nephew.”

A nephew. Well, at least Rakestraw had established a definite link between Otto Kerchen and another human besides a resident of The Projects and that was a beginning.

Rakestraw returned the photograph to his pocket, but the young man seemed to want to remember more.

Rakestraw didn’t prod him.

“Seems to be there was this other oldtimer. I seen him in here a couple of times playing shuffleboard with Otto and drinking beers with him.”

“Do you know his name?”

“I never asked him. In these dives on Beacon it isn’t healthy to be inquisitive.”

Rakestraw took out his wallet and gave the young man one of his cards.

“You’re with the cops,” he said, reading.

“What’s your first name?”

“Rolf.”

"Well, Rolf, if this other oldtimer should come in while you're here, I'd like you to call me at this number."

"Rakestraw. That you?"

"That's me. It could be very important. Any hour, day or night. People there will know how to reach me."

"I could ask him to call you."

"No, I wouldn't do that. You spook him, he may run. And if he runs, I may not catch him."

"You think maybe he killed Otto?"

"Right at this point, I don't know what to think," said Rakestraw. "Right now, I'm just trying to collect the names and numbers of all the players."

"I'll do my best," said Rolf.

Rakestraw thanked him, downed his beer and left.

MORE AND MORE, MANUEL COMFORTA WAS RECEDING farther and farther into the background as a suspect. Then, why would Otto Kerchen speak his name with this dying breath? It didn't make an ounce of sense.

Rakestraw next telephoned the State Employment Security Division, identified himself and asked to speak with Constance Dunne.

His wait lasted only a minute.

"Yes, lieutenant, how may I help you?"

"A man named Otto Kerchen was murdered this morning in Highpoint," Rakestraw told the woman. "Your name was found among his personal effects. Was he one of your clients?"

"I have over three-hundred clients, lieutenant. Let me check my files for you. What was his name, again?"

"Kerchen. Otto Kerchen."

"One minute."

His wait was even shorter than that. Constance Dunne was an efficient woman.

"Here we go," she said, coming back on the line. "Kerchen, Otto Everett. Age, 56. Address, 1218 Walnut Street, Highpoint."

"That's him. You were trying to find him employment?"

"So many unemployed males in their fifties," Constance Dunne lamented. "And so many of them unfit for the Computer Age and unwilling or unable to learn. It seems the only training Mr. Kerchen had was in janitorial work, but that was over twenty years ago, and he hadn't had any experience in that field for at least a decade. I remember him now. A sad-faced little man, but very polite and eager. I swear, the

world beats down on some of these people so hard and so relentlessly, it makes them start to apologize for even being alive."

"Were you working on anything specific for him?" Rakestraw asked.

"Let me see. Yes. I *did* tell him about one job opportunity, although his chances wouldn't have been terribly good. You know the new mini-dome sports and convention arena they just put the finishing touches on a month or so ago in Riverton?"

Rakestraw said he'd read of its completion.

"They'll be taking applications and testing to fill thirty janitorial and maintenance positions. Next week, as a matter of fact. Thousands of them will descend on that place in hordes and most of them will be over-qualified, or out-of-synch with the times, like Otto Kerchen."

Rakestraw asked the woman what kind of testing the applicants would be undergoing.

"Most commercial janitorial and maintenance firms and those who need to fill those type positions use our standardized state exam given to governmental and institutional employees, those who work in state government office buildings, state hospital facilities and the public schools. It's a pretty comprehensive exam and updated every year or so. People like Otto Kerchen will be dumbfounded by it, but still we keep trying to shoehorn these people into positions for which they aren't qualified."

"Can you give me the exact date and place of that exam?" Rakestraw said.

"It's here somewhere," said Constance Dunne. "Yes. June 28th, nine a.m., Riverton Sports and Convention Center, Room 200. Otto Kerchen didn't even own a car and it's sixteen miles out there. I don't know how he expected to make it. Well, he won't have to worry about that now. Such a shame. Is there anything else I can help you with, lieutenant?"

"No. You've been very cooperative, Ms. Dunne. Thank you."

Well, he was drawing together a network of people and events, but seemingly without connection. Of all he had learned, what pertained and what didn't pertain? Which threads led to the identification of a killer and which only trailed off into space?

AROUND TWO P.M., RAKESTRAW GOT HOLD OF THE Medical Examiner's Office. The results of the autopsy on Otto Kerchen were still being compiled, but an M.E. assistant named Darby had already begun his tests on the ancient coveralls.

"These really ought to be in the Smithsonian, Rakestraw," he told

the detective by telephone. "The pocket and seam rivets are at least thirty years old, but they're holding as fast as the day they were applied."

"What else?"

"I think I've pinpointed the origin of one of the laundry marks for you," Darby said. "The Elite Sanitation Company. Their plant used to be on Roy Street, next to the Fuzzy Wuzzy Rug Cleaners. Both buildings came down in the late fifties for a freeway ramp. It seems the Elite did quite a lot of institutional laundry. County and city jail inmate clothing, bedsheets and mattress covers. Work clothes worn by Parks and Recreation employees and maintenance workers in the public school system."

"Do you think you'll be able to trace them back to the manufacturer?"

"Lieutenant, we can trace a strand of silk back to the worm who spun it. Give us another twenty-four hours and we'll have your maker for you."

Rakestraw put up the phone satisfied. Everything had a human consequence and he'd never yet been let down by what a medical examiner found. He'd seen delays and mix-ups and retests and second opinions. But never failure.

But that was twenty-four hours down the road and there were still working hours left in his day. *Kerchen*. It sounded vaguely Balkan or German to him. And not such a common surname. Rakestraw, except for his mother, was the only Rakestraw in the directory. Was there just one other Kerchen, as well? A nephew?

He pulled out the city directory, did not precisely pray but tried to give prayer some due, and found the K's. His right index finger ran down Kelsey, then jumped a column to Kepperman, Keran, Kerbey, Kerchavoski.

When his eyes saw only a single Kerchen, his heart seemed to drop out of his chest as though it had been tossed down an elevator shaft. But the first name listed was not Otto but Joshua. Otto Kerchen had no telephone. Angela Mott, when she'd discovered her neighbor's body, had returned to her own duplex to telephone for the police.

Rakestraw dialed the number in the director. A woman's voice answered.

"This is Jake Rakestraw," Rakestraw said, choosing for the moment not to cause the woman undue shock or anguish by telling her he was a police detective. "I'm a friend of Joshua's Uncle Otto. Is Joshua there?"

"Josh is still at work, Mr. Rakestraw. Is there anything I can do?"

"Well, I'd like to speak with him personally. Is this his wife?"

"Debra, yes, Josh will be home at six. They're stripping wax on the floors over at the school and laying some hardwood in the gymnasium."

"I wonder . . . could I drop by there and talk with him?"

"I don't see why you couldn't. It's the Bailey Gatzert Grade School on Thornydyke Street, just eight blocks south of here. Is . . . is Uncle Otto in any sort of trouble? He has a tendency to get mixed up with the wrong kind of people. He's basically a good man, but he's had a lot of rough breaks and . . . well, I'm afraid he doesn't read people awfully well."

Rakestraw knew the strict procedures when it came to the notification of next-of-kin and who took precedence in the family chain.

He never wanted it said of him that he'd bypassed any links simply to get the grisly job done.

"I'll let your husband talk to you about that, Mrs. Kerchen. The school is on Thorndyke, did you say?"

"Thorndyke Street, yes."

THE HILLTOP SCHOOL WAS AS WORTHY AND VENERABLE AS an aging former president and as stately as a grand duke. Its brick was the dark red of a classic burgundy wine and its turreted corners looked like places where ancient men had written great books. But it was dying.

These days its student rooms were shared by seniors and handicapped children and a cultural center for Northwest Indians. The flight to the suburbs and a declining birthrate meant that only its multi-use had saved its destruction.

Part of its cracked asphalt playground was now lined as a parking lot and a large sign said the building was closed to the public the current week for renovations and repairs.

Rakestraw drove into the lot and parked next to a compact station wagon, the only other car on the grounds. He was pondering the futility of trying to locate the only other human in such a cavernous building when a door suddenly banged open and Rakestraw saw a young workman emerge into bright sunlight. His deeply tanned face favored that of the young boy in the photograph Rakestraw had found in Otto Kerchen's wallet.

"The center is closed to the public this week."

"Yes, I know. Your wife told me, Mr. Kerchen."

"You know my wife?"

"I've just come from talking with her. My name is Rakestraw. I'm a police detective."

Joshua Kerchen still looked more boy than man with all that tossed blond hair and those youthful, bright eyes. Well, he might be growing up a little bit in the next minute or so, Rakestraw thought.

"Is something wrong? Is it my wife?" Joshua Kerchen said.

"Yes, something is wrong, but it's not your wife, Mr. Kerchen. Your uncle, Otto Kerchen, was killed this morning at his home in the Highpoint Housing Project."

"Killed?"

"He was stabbed to death. He lived long enough to speak the first name of his killer, someone named Manuel. Do you know anyone with that first name?"

"No. I don't think so. No, I'm positive I don't. Uncle Otto is *dead*?"

"I'm very sorry, yes."

Kerchen's chest heaved with a heartbreaking sigh. "I must have pleaded with him a hundred times to move out of The Projects. But he was as stubborn as they come."

Rakestraw took out the old photograph and presented it to Joshua Kerchen. "Maybe you'd like to keep this as a memento. We won't be needing it as evidence and it would be nice to have some sort of photographic record of your uncle. I don't expect many pictures of him exist."

As the young man examined the photograph, his eyes began to take on a faraway look as he traveled back through time and space. "Wow. Who was it said you couldn't go home again?"

"Thomas Wolfe, I think" said Rakestraw.

"Well, he was wrong. This was twenty-five years ago, but I remember it as though it happened only this morning."

Joshua Kerchen turned then and walked off down the asphalt schoolyard, keeping close to the side of the building. Rakestraw trailed after him, around the niches and juts until Kerchen came to a halt in a quiet little corner of brick. "Here it is," he said to Rakestraw. "Here's where this picture was taken. I used to come by here to see Uncle Otto nearly every day in the summers."

"Your uncle *worked* here?" Rakestraw said.

"It was his first janitorial job with the public schools. When the other kids went off fishing or hiking, I'd bike down here and watch him mix sweeping compound and varnish desks and put in new slate blackboards."

"Do you remember who took the photograph?"

"Must have been one of the men who worked with him, but I really couldn't say for certain. Ironical, huh? Here we are, twenty-five years later and I'm working at the same job, in the same school."

"Did your uncle work here a long time?" Rakestraw asked.

Not long, no. He always had trouble holding onto jobs. He was a merchant seaman for a while, a third engineer on a freighter. He got in a fight in a bar in Singapore and he was shot in the lower back. He had some surgeries for spinal fusion, but they weren't very successful. After that, he was pretty much your classic welfare case, just a nice guy who'd been dealt more than his share of rotten breaks."

"I'm interested in an older man your uncle was known to drink with," Rakestraw said. "He may be involved in the death of your uncle and then again, he may be completely innocent. But he has to be tracked down and questioned."

"There was an old guy came to the house a couple of times," said Joshua Kerchen. "I was at work both times. Debra told me he said Uncle Otto owed him money from a shuffleboard bet. Debra wouldn't let him into the house and refused to give him any money. He looked dangerous, just had that look in his eye that said he could hurt people on the quota-system for money if he had to. Debra said he had a tattoo of a snake on his left forearm. The second time, after he left, she called the police, but they couldn't find him and he never came back again."

"Did the man mention his name?"

"No. He just passed himself off as a friend of Uncle Otto's. Just one more scam to him. It went afoul and now he's out there someplace, trying to latch onto another sucker."

They began walking slowly back to the front of the building. Rakestraw's steps passed over a hopscotch court, its geometric squares and numbers barely discernible. Likely, a game hadn't been played on it in years. Likely, the game itself had passed into history.

"When was the last time you saw your uncle?" Rakestraw asked, hoping to gain nothing from the question really, but simply asking it out of homicidal routine.

How completely wrong he was.

"I saw him just last week," answered the young man.

"Was he just paying you a family visit, or did he come to see you about something specific?"

"As a matter of fact, he was very specific about what he wanted. You see, they'd just completed the mini-dome in Riverton and they were going to be hiring maintenance personnel and concessions people and ushers and the like. But Uncle Otto had been out of touch for so long that it made him almost unemployable, so he came to me for help . . ."

Rakestraw listened carefully to the rest of Joshua Kerchen's story, the telling not entirely unlike being shown a picture-puzzle sheep in the clouds,

fleecy and gambolling and there all along.

And now knowing why Otto Kerchen had been murdered saddened him a bit, just as he had been saddened at having to arrest Sally Oroniz for murdering over a cast iron frying pan. These hard times made strange killers indeed..

HE RETURNED TO THE PUBLIC SAFETY BUILDING AS DUSK began to fall across the fringes of the sky. He felt he was on a roll now; and he had an odd hunch he'd be getting a telephone call from a round-the-clock blood donor at The Dew-Drop-Inn.

That call came as he was finishing off a late dinner, a fistful of peanut butter cups and an apple from the vending machines out in the hallway.

"Lieutenant Rakestraw?"

"Speaking."

"This is the guy you talked to this afternoon at the Dew-Drop. About Otto Kerchen? And this old guy he used to be chummy with?"

"I remember," Rakestraw said.

"Well, he just came into the tavern about five minutes ago."

"Does he have a tattoo of a snake on his left forearm?"

"That's the one. No telling how long he'll stay, though."

"You can keep him there fifteen minutes, can't you?"

"How do I do *that*?"

"Hit him where he lives," said Rakestraw, as he wrestled into his suitcoat and tried to keep from wearing the telephone's receiver as an accessory. "Get him into a game of shuffleboard."

THE DRIVE ACROSS TOWN TO HIGHPOINT WAS TWENTY MINUTES if you were trying to reach it for the first time, fifteen if you were a native, and twelve if you were a police detective going there in search of a killer.

Rakestraw made it in eleven.

No one was playing shuffleboard now, but Rakestraw spotted the young blood donor seated at a nearby booth with an older man. When he reached them, the younger man slipped out of the booth hurriedly and vanished out a side door of the tavern.

Rakestraw took his place across from the older man, smiled and laid his shield on the tabletop. Joshua Kerchen had been right about the eyes: they looked dangerous and now, just a little hunted. *And* a little preoccupied by the side door through which the blood donor had run.

"Do you have a name, Snake Arm?"

The man hadn't shaved in days. In the wily, ancient eyes was a definite

gleam of contention. "What is this, a pop quiz?"

"Right now," said Rakestraw, evenly, "it's only a small conversation in a bar. But it *could* graduate into a full-scale inquisition if you get difficult."

The grisly face ceased smiling. "It's Bennie Schwarzmänn."

"Ever go by any other name, Bennie?"

"Some people know me as Bennie Schwartz," said Schwarzman. "Isn't no crime to change your name."

"Ah, but it *is* if it isn't changed *legally*, Bennie. You change it *legally*?"

"Bureaucratic red tape. Paperwork. I just use the name sometimes."

"Let's move to the heart of another matter, Bennie. A man was killed this morning in The Projects."

"Somebody's *always* getting killed in The Projects," said Schwarzmänn.

"That's like trying to shock me by saying it's dangerous on the freeway."

"His name was Otto Kerchen. I'm told you were a pretty good friend of his."

"We drank some beer in here, played a little shuffleboard. I didn't hang out with him."

"And you didn't kill him, either."

"Street-talk says you're looking for a Latino named Manuel. Even if you was playing anagrams, you couldn't get Manuel out of Bennie."

"And that's the straight dope, Bennie. Until I had a little chat with Otto's nephew this afternoon."

The smirk was slowly transforming itself into a little longer face. And Bennie Schwarzmänn's hands could not seem to find rest on the scarred tabletop.

"It seems Otto Kerchen had dreams to put himself back into the work force. He was tired of the idleness and shame of welfare. But the thing he knew best was the thing he hadn't done in over twenty years—janitorial and maintenance work.

"And then those jobs opened up at the mini-dome in Riverton, lots of jobs, lots of applicants, too. But Otto Kerchen saw for himself the inside-track, an edge on his competition . . ."

Bennie Schwarzmänn seemed to be wrestling with his own private picture puzzle, his own personal sheep in the clouds. His eyes were cloudy and seemed to be losing their formidable look.

". . . all state service agencies use it," Rakestraw was continuing, "because it's comprehensive and standardized; and many private, commercial companies form their standardized written tests from it. It became Otto Kerchen's stroke of good fortune and like nearly all incidents of good fortune, it proceeded from good planning and design. A full circle had been met. An uncle had been helper and guardian to a nephew in a distant past; and now a nephew could show his love and gratitude to the aging uncle who

wanted desperately to recover his lost pride and sense of self-worth."

Bennie Schwarzmänn's private dawn had thundered. All the blood had drained from his face, leaving it pallid and waxen. He knew. He knew.

Otto Kerchen's dying words weren't 'It was Manuel who did it',' Rakestraw was finishing now, merely by way of confirming what Bennie Schwarzmänn was thinking. "He said only the single word, 'Manuel.' And everyone took it to mean something different. A city patrolman, the woman who had heard him speak, me and all the others all along the grapevine of The Projects. And yes, Bennie, yourself included."

"And up until a minute ago, you felt safe in the knowledge that it *was* a person the police were looking for and not a motive, not a *thing*. But now you know it wasn't a person's name Otto Kerchen spoke. And that you can't destroy it in time. You fought with him over it, killed him for it, and now have it as a possession. Unfortunately, its very existence will now prove you a murderer."

"It was either me or him for it," said Bennie Schwarzmänn, looking beaten and whipped now, like a cur dog cowering in a corner. "It was a *job*, a chance for a *job*. It was the best man wins."

"You didn't even read the title on it, did you?" Rakestraw said. "No, I expect not. *Manual for Maintenance and Sanitation in the Public School System*. Manual. Not *Manuel*, not a person. That ignorance wrapped you in a false sense of security, like the false warmth of the freezing cold a person senses before he lapses into unconsciousness and freezes to death. Bennie, a nephew's fingerprints are in every page of that manual, as are the fingerprints of his uncle, who had used that gift to study for a janitorial job at the mini-dome in Riverton."

"It was self-defense. It was me or him. Any jury is gonna see it that way."

"No, Bennie. What it *was* was murder committed during an act of robbery. That instruction manual wasn't up for grabs. It was the legitimate property of Otto Kerchen and any number of lab tests will prove that beyond any question. All that's left to be established now, Bennie, is where you live, so that manual can be retrieved for use as evidence."

"I live in Belltown. At the Reliance Hotel."

Rakestraw led Bennie Schwarzmänn out of the tavern without benefit of handcuffs. No useful purpose was ever served by humiliating someone in the company of friends and acquaintances and Bennie was too old now to pose him any real threat or risk as an arrestee. He even allowed him to sit in the front seat with him in the unmarked so they could keep each other company on the ride into town. These indeed were hard times. And in times like these, Rakestraw somehow felt the pressure of duty to extend every courtesy.

He was a maniac who enjoyed blowing up things like cars and buildings and people. Worse than that, he got away with it!

Nothing Personal

by MEL WASHBURN

THE GUY WAS A MANIAC—YOU COULD TELL JUST BY looking at him. He sat perfectly still, as rigid as a wooden Indian, while his face twitched and ticked, his mouth alternately grinned and gaped, and his eyes darted this way and that, now peering alertly up at the two cops, now staring apprehensively out the window. *Watching his face,*

thought Sergeant Harry Brown, *was like watching a TV screen while somebody else flipped the tuner, randomly and unpredictably, from channel to channel, from comedy to tragedy to cartoon.* The guy's face was registering emotional chaos because he was feeling every sort of emotion all at once, or perhaps no emotion at all. Either way, he was clearly a maniac.

"You get enough liquid nitrogen together," Harry Brown was telling him, "say two or three hundred pounds; you stir in a few other chemicals; and you've made yourself a highly volatile mixture with a lot of the properties of TNT."

"Oh, yeah?" The maniac smirked. "How does a guy like you know about stuff like that?" he asked, implying that Harry Brown looked too dumb to understand the finer points of bomb making.

Harry Brown blushed in spite of himself: he was overweight, middle-aged, bulb-nosed, and balding. He was a dumb-looking guy and he knew it. "I studied demolitions in the Army, years ago. And I brushed up on the subject, a couple of different times, at the FBI Academy."

"Goodness me! And this liquid-nitrogen thing, it really makes an explosion?" the madman asked innocently.

"Apparently so. A panel truck full of the stuff went up like an H-bomb in front of the First Citizens' Bank an hour ago."

"No fooling?"

"You didn't hear the explosion? Our patrol car picked you up just a few blocks away." Harry Brown took the stub of a used cigar from his coat pocket and stuck its tip into his mouth. "The whole area down there just reeks of nitrogen fertilizer." He lit a match and held it next to the maniac's clothing, where it burned with a peculiar green flame. "And so do you. We could almost bottle the air around you and sell it back to the farmers."

The maniac's eyes rolled wildly. "Be careful with that match, will you? A guy could catch on fire."

"Sorry." Harry lit his cigar and blew out the match. "Didn't mean to frighten you."

"Don't worry. You didn't." Out of danger now, the maniac studied the fingers of his right hand in an exaggerated pantomime of bored innocence. "I guess if that panel truck went up like an H-bomb, there can't be many pieces of it left. Certainly nothing you could call evidence." He smiled up into Detective Phil Martino's face. "No fingerprints or anything."

"We don't need fingerprints," said Martino. "We've got you. And you stink of nitro. You're stinking up the whole squad room."

The maniac giggled. "That ain't nitrogen you smell. It's dry cleaning fluid. I just got this outfit back from the laundry." He glanced down at his greasy blue coveralls, spattered with a month's worth of food stains and cigarette crumbs. "Though, now I notice, they didn't do a very good job cleaning it." He glanced up brightly from one cop's face to the other. Then he frowned. "Probably I should ask for my money back."

"You lying little sack of crud," growled Martino.

"Take it easy, Phil," cautioned Harry Brown.

"Yeah, Phil," chirped the maniac, "take it easy."

PHIL WAS ANGRY, AND HE HAD GOOD REASON. IN FRONT of the First Citizens' Bank that morning at 4:27 AM, a panel truck, illegally parked in front of the bank, had erupted into smoke and flames, exploding with such force that it had blackened the bank's marble facade to a height of three stories, overturned two nearby cars, flattened an entire row of lamp posts, shattered all the windows for three blocks around—and killed a policeman who, according to the log at Central Dispatch, had stopped to hang a parking ticket on the truck's windshield. He had been a twenty-three year veteran; a white-haired, likeable fellow with a wife and kids and a grandson; an unassuming man who had refused promotion several times because he liked the peace and quiet of third-shift duty in the financial district.

He had been a special friend of Phil Martino's. And now they couldn't collect enough of him to fill a shoebox. He wasn't just dead: he was obliterated.

And the giggling maniac who sat rigidly on an uncomfortable wooden chair in a small room at the rear of the second floor of the Halsted Police Annex, smiling zantly up at Harry Brown and Phil Martino, was responsible for the whole bloody mess. He was "Bomber Joe" Sandburg, a remote cousin of the famous poet, a dedicated anarchist and political fanatic who had lost all the fingers from his left hand seven years ago when a little device he had been constructing had exploded prematurely. Since then, according to police informants, he had specialized in large devices: exploding mailboxes, exploding trash cans, exploding automobiles.

And now a panel truck.

"You've gotten away with some monstrous things over the years" Martino told him, "but you're not getting away with murder. We've got you dead to rights this time."

"I don't believe you have," said the maniac

AND HE WAS RIGHT. THREE DAYS LATER, WHEN THEY held the preliminary hearing, the judge threw the whole case out of court. "You seem to have been the victim of police harassment, Mr. Sandburg," he told the maniac. "I don't agree with your political ideas; no responsible citizen does. But your options, no matter how bizarre, do not constitute evidence of a crime. And your presence in the vicinity of the explosion might have been entirely fortuitous."

"It was, Your Honor. I happened to be out for a stroll, was all." The maniac was dressed in a neat blue suit, white shirt, and maroon tie. Someone, perhaps his lawyer, had taught him to stare down at his hands rather than glancing frantically about the room. All in all, he looked more like a person who worked in a bank than a fanatic who tried to blow up banks. "I commend Your Honor's ability to rise above petty prejudice and see the truth of my case. Such wisdom is a rare commodity these days."

"You murdering little swine," growled Martino so loudly that the entire courtroom could hear him.

"Quiet, please!" commanded the judge. "There is no place in a court proceeding for expressions of personal animosity."

"I forgive him, Your Honor," said the maniac graciously, and he walked out of the courtroom a free man.

"Don't take it so hard," Harry Brown counseled Phil Martino later as they sat drinking coffee in the Homicide South squadroom. "You win some, you lose some. It's just the nature of this job."

"I can't help myself, Harry. That smirking little rat . . . he just annoys me no end."

"Well, don't let him."

Martino's hand was clenching his coffee mug so firmly that his knuckles were white. "I'll try, Harry. I promise."

HARRY AND MARTINO AND A COUPLE OF TEAMS FROM the Evidence Lab spent the next several days down in the vicinity of the First Citizens' Bank, looking for something—anything—to connect the panel truck bomb with Joe Sandburg. They searched high and low, far and wide, because the explosion had scattered potential evidence all over a nine-block area. They found a few little things—some grisly, some pitiful—but they didn't find any bits of the bomb mechanism or any other rag or scrap that might constitute hard evidence.

Then Harry and Martino went down to the neighborhood where Sandburg lived and questioned his neighbors, but still they gained nothing. He was a quiet fellow, never had any visitors, never did

anything remarkable. The old lady who lived next door even said that she liked him: he was kind to her little dog.

Meanwhile, the city went about its business: the sun rose and set, people went to work and came home again, and new murders were committed, less mysterious murders with suspects less cunning and motives more obvious—cases that could be solved with a few days' work. Some of these cases were assigned to Brown and Martino, who at first neglected this burgeoning caseload to work full time on the bombing. But their captain began hinting, and finally demanding, that they get to work on something more productive, something that could improve the squad's percentage of "cases solved."

Martino didn't like to do it, and neither did Harry Brown, but they bundled together all their reports and notes on the bombing, put them into a folder marked "First Citizens" and put it all into the back of a file drawer. Then they got busy interviewing a guy whose wife's corpse had been found in a dumpster out in back of their apartment building the day after she had filed divorce papers on him. The guy himself was full of remorse: he wept freely before the detectives and cooperated fully in providing them with all the information they needed to close the case.

Then Martino came down with the flu or something and took a couple of days of work, while Harry Brown turned his attention to the gang-style execution of a couple of Argentine "tourists" who had been peddling cut-rate cocaine to the wrong people. Harry sat for several hours in the Intensive Care Ward at Michael Reese, questioning a very sick entertainer, a guitar player in a Salsa band, who had nearly turned himself catatonic with an injection of unexpectedly pure cocaine. Then he spent a couple of days undercover in a pool hall across the street from the abandoned hotel where the Argentine corpses had been found. And finally he sat down with the deceased South Americans' criminal records, fresh off the teletype from Buenos Aires.

Ricardo Desota, the squad's only Latino, was out on special assignment for the week, so Harry, who had studied the language for three years in night school, got out his Cassel's *English/Espanol* and began reading the teletypes, looking for Chicago connections in these Argentinians' extensive criminal careers. After several hours, two pots of coffee, and a half-dozen cigars, he thought he was getting somewhere. His head ached unmercifully, but his thoughts were beginning to clear. And then the phone rang. "Brown, Homicide," snapped Harry.

"Brown homicide?" repeated a mocking voice.

Harry sighed. "This is Sergeant Harry Brown, South Homicide Squad, speaking. Who's this?"

"This is Joe Sandburg. Remember me?"

HARRY CAME SUDDENLY ALERT: IT WAS WONDERFUL TO him how these maniacs, especially the smart ones, couldn't be satisfied with just escaping the snares of the law. They always wanted to tie up the loose ends behind them. And often, in the process, they got all tangled up again. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You can tell your buddy . . . what's his name? The big, ugly one who growls all the time?"

"Martino?"

"Yeah, Martino. You can tell him to quit following me around. It's beginning to annoy me."

"Is he following you around?"

"Yes, he is. And it ain't fair. The judge threw the case out. And now you won't let up. I warn you, I'm going to see my lawyer. Get an injunction or something."

"I don't think an injunction will do the trick."

"Well I need something. My nerves aren't so good anyway, and now this guy's got me all upset."

"Try not to take so much to heart, Mr. Sandburg, that's my advice," said Harry soothingly. "It's nothing personal."

"Oh yes it is. It's personal to me and I'm going to do something. I'm warning you."

"Is this a threat?" asked Harry, hoping the maniac would say something self-incriminating. But the maniac just hung up.

Harry cleared the line and dialed Martino's home phone number. Martino's wife answered. "Let me talk to Phil, Anna," he asked, and there was a long pause. "Isn't he home?"

"Oh sure, Harry. He's right in the next room. It's just . . . um . . . he's sleeping."

"Okay. He's been sick, I know, so don't bother him. It wasn't important."

After Anna hung up, Harry packed the Argentine teletypes, the Spanish dictionary, and some extra cigars into his battered Samsonite briefcase, went downstairs to the police garage and checked out an unmarked squad, a dirty green Chevy with no chrome, black-wall tires, and moldy, rump-sprung seats. He drove the car out to the west side of town, parked across the street from Martino's house, and, opening the briefcase, began translating his way through the murder victims'

criminal records again.

THE SUN SET. THE STREET LAMPS LIT UP. HARRY BROWN'S stomach growled, but he had foolishly neglected to bring any food along, and cigar smoke could not assuage his hunger. But Harry suffered patiently rather than leave his post.

And then at last, about seven thirty, a red Toyota pulled into the driveway and the bear-sized Phil Martino, not looking very sick at all, extricated himself from the little car and walked toward the side door of his house. "Hey, Phil!" Harry shouted, jumping out of his green Chevy. "See you a minute?"

Martino stopped in his tracks. "Is this official?" he asked while the overweight sergeant was still huffing toward him across the sparse, unhealthy grass of his front lawn.

"Afraid it is, Phil. I've had a citizen's complaint about you."

"From Sandburg?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"I just knew."

"Is it true, Phil, that you've been following him around everywhere?"

"It's true."

"On your own personal time? In your own personal car? No official connection?"

"That's right." Martino's jaw set stubbornly. "I told you, Harry, that the whole thing got to me. A good cop blown to bits, and that little creep takes a walk. It just isn't right."

"I know it isn't. But what you're doing isn't right either."

Martino grimaced bitterly. "If you mean about his rights, his citizen's rights . . ." He almost choked on the phrase.

"I don't mean about that," Harry interrupted. "I just mean . . . well, damn it, this is a job. A profession. You can't make something personal out of it. Not and be a good cop. First you bend the rules, then you break them. You call in sick when you're not. You shadow a guy when you've got no business . . ."

"I've got business, Harry," said Martino indignantly. "You know I've got business." He took a deep breath, fighting to control his emotions. "And besides, I've found something out: the little rat is planning another outrage. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I'm going to catch him when he does it."

"And then what?" Harry demanded. "What when you catch him? You're as illegal as he is. Whatever you get on him, the judge will throw

it out, and . . .” Harry sighed unhappily. He could see he wasn’t making any impression on Martino. “Come back to work, Phil. That’s all I’m telling you. Be on duty tomorrow, or I’ll notify the captain that you’re abusing your sick leave. That’s all I’ll say: nothing about this Sandburg business.”

“Notify away, Harry. My family doctor will swear up and down that I’ve got the flu.”

“You’re making a mistake, Phil.”

Martino’s face softened. “Don’t worry, okay? Things’ll work out, believe me.”

Harry didn’t believe him, but he could tell he wasn’t going to change the big Italian’s mind with any more lectures, not man to man, and certainly not sergeant to detective. So he went away before Martino said something they’d both regret later. He returned to the station, handed in the keys to the Chevy, and went home to bed.

THE NEXT DAY, PHIL MARTINO DIDN’T REPORT FOR DUTY. Nor did he report the day after. Harry notified the captain that he suspected Martino of malingering, and the captain probably filed a report with Internal Affairs.

Meanwhile, in the matter of the murdered Argentinians, Harry at last finished reading their files and discovered that they had had a cousin who owned a quasi-legal nightclub in Little Mexico. The cousin, when Harry went looking for him, had gone into hiding, but a disgruntled cocktail waitress indicated the general direction he’d gone, and in twenty-four hours Harry had the cousin in an interrogation room, naming the names of a couple of Cuban coke dealers who had taken violent exception to his South American relatives’ cut-rate competition.

Another case solved. But still Harry worried about Phil Martino, who was risking his career to play games with a possibly dangerous lunatic. He called the Martinos’ house several times, but each time it was Anna who answered, saying Phil was too sick to come to the phone. So on the third day after their conversation on the front lawn, Harry got out of bed very early in the morning and drove over to the west side of town again, parking his car, a grey-on-grey Chrysler that had cost him a half a year’s salary, across the street from the Martinos’ brick bungalow. The red Toyota was still in the driveway, and the only light showing the house was at the back, in the kitchen.

Harry Brown poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos he’d brought along and ate a couple of stale doughnuts out of a box left over from the day before. He was just unscrewing the cap on the thermos to

pour himself a second cup, when he saw Phil Martino step out the side door of his house and climb hurriedly into the little Japanese car. Harry shoved the stopper back into the thermos and was just reaching for the door handle when his windshield shattered into half a million pieces and a hot blast of air seared his cheek. Looking across the street, he saw an orange ball of flame where a moment ago there had been a red Toyota.

In the next two days, a thorough investigation determined that Phil Martino had died in an improbable but nevertheless possible home accident, the victim of a faulty carburetor. Even Harry himself, after reviewing all the evidence, had to agree with the findings. He never even brought Sandburg in for questioning.

MUCH AS HE WANTED TO, HARRY DIDN'T WEAR HIS OLD blue uniform to the funeral because the jacket wouldn't button over his belly anymore and the trousers pulled so tight across his thighs that the zipper showed in front. So he wore instead his grey striped suit and stood at attention when the bugler played taps and the honor guard fired their rifles. There were not many cops present because Martino's death had been a personal, not a police department, tragedy, and so the squads and platoons of men in uniform who would turn out for a brother officer killed in the line of duty stayed home today, and only the honor guard and the dozen or so cops who had known Martino personally showed up at the cemetery.

And, of course, the family.

And the maniac too, Joe Sandburg, dressed once again in his blue suit, trying very hard to look solemn, but from time to time darting furtive, smirking glances at Harry Brown.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked him quietly when the services were done and the crowd was dispersing.

"I read about it in the papers," grinned the little madman. "I thought it was just awful. Those little, foreign cars, the government ought to ban them."

Harry wrapped his thick, muscular fingers around the madman's arm. "You've got some nerve."

Sandburg's insane little eyes widened with fear, but the rest of his face remained passive. "Leave me alone," he hissed. "You saw what happened. Now leave me alone."

"How do you know what I saw? Were you there too?"

The maniac smiled nervously, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Was I where, sergeant?"

Harry's grip tightened reflexively on the man's thin, wiry arm. "And why were you there," he continued, "unless you knew what was going to happen? And how could you know, unless . . ."

Sandburg's free hand, the one without any fingers, pressed ineffectually against Harry's chest, trying to push him away. "Let me go or I'll call for help."

Harry Brown wanted to let go. He knew he should let go. But he just couldn't. He stared malevolently down into the pale, rat-like face of the mad bomber. "You set a bomb in Phil's car, didn't you?" he demanded.

But the little man wouldn't answer him. Instead he opened his mouth as wide as he could and screamed for help. And a half-dozen cops, including two precinct captains and an assistant commissioner, helped to pry Harry Brown's fingers loose from the maniac's arm.

Harry was certain now that Phil Martino had died in the line of duty, a martyred officer every bit as much as the ones who were cut down by fleeing gunmen or had the roof fall on them while trying to rescue some child from a burning building. But Phil had received no martyr's funeral because he'd died on his own time, in his personal car, and no one had known the reason why. And his widow would not get the extra \$25,000 death benefit or, more importantly, the satisfaction of knowing her man had gone out a hero, a cop to the end.

Phil had probably told Anna that he was playing sick to go to the race track or something, and she had covered for him. And now she'd never know any different, because Harry Brown, as much as he wanted to, would never tell her; he was going to keep Phil's secret a secret and start playing things smart himself.

IT WAS EARLY IN THE MORNING AND IT WAS VERY DARK and cold. Inside the van, two large garbage cans and a couple of five-gallon pails gave off a thick, acrid mist—not exactly harmful to your lungs, but certainly not pleasant to breathe either. Joe Sandburg held a small flashlight between his teeth, directing its beam onto the detonating mechanism—a jumble of wires and the guts of an old alarm clock hooked up at one end to a bundle of dynamite and at the other end to a 6-volt battery. Very carefully he adjusted the small arms of the clock face with the cold, numb fingers of his right hand. Then he gently made the final connection and, taking one last look around the back of the van, climbed out, locking the door behind him.

He straightened up and breathed deeply: the air was fresher outside the van, but even here you could detect the faint aroma of liquid

nitrogen which, after the explosion, would become an overwhelming stench up and down the street. He flexed the fingers of his hand and checked his wristwatch: seventeen minutes to go. Plenty of time.

He took one last, malevolent look at the majestic marble columns and the imitation Athenian facade of the bank. "This will give the fat cats something to think about," he muttered. And then, inquisitively, he touched his fingers to the lower half of his face: he was grinning like a gargoyle. *I must be happy*, he thought. *This work must please me deeply.*

He was just turning to walk away when a big grey car pulled up to the curb. It was a Chrysler, a rich man's car. One of the fat cats was stopping by his bank.

Joe Sandburg turned up the collar of his coat so the plutocrat couldn't see him grinning and started to walk away. He stuck his hands down deep in his pockets, partly because they were cold and partly so the rich man, if he survived the blast, wouldn't remember a man with no fingers on one hand.

The fat cat got out of his car: "Hey, Sandburg!" he shouted. "Stop where you are!"

Joe Sandburg froze in his tracks. He knew that voice: it was the big, fat, dumb cop, Sergeant Harry Brown. "You want to talk to me?" the maniac inquired, glancing at his wristwatch: fourteen minutes to go.

The fat cop swaggered toward him. "Your van here is illegally parked. You've got to move it."

"That's not my van."

"I just saw you get out of it a few minutes ago."

The maniac smiled foxily. "I didn't say that I'd never been in it. I just said it wasn't mine."

"Then you stole it?"

The maniac shook his head. "Not answering that," he said. "You steal that one?" He nodded toward the big, grey-on-grey Chrysler.

"No. I bought it."

"No kidding?" Eleven minutes to go.

"How come you keep checking your watch? You expecting someone?"

"Got a date with an angel." The maniac snickered. He was getting tired of lying to this dumb cop. He wanted to leave. "Well, I got to leave," he said.

"Not a chance." The cop took hold of the maniac's arm and twisted it behind his back. "I want you to stay here with me." He made the maniac walk towards the van with him. "Let's get inside your van here

so we can keep warm." He tried the door handle. "Seems to be locked."

"It is locked," the maniac told him. "And in about five minutes it's going to blow up like an H bomb."

"Give me the key."

"Not a chance. Let's get into your big car and get away from here."

"No deal." The cop let go of the maniac's arm. "Give me the key so I can get inside and disarm the bomb."

The maniac had to think a moment. If this big lummoX tried to disarm the mechanism, he'd certainly blow himself to kingdom come. "Tell you what," said the maniac, "I'll trade you even-steven. The van's keys for the keys of your car."

"Okay."

The maniac was amazed: this cop was even dumber than he looked. They exchanged keys. The maniac got into the Chrysler, which smelled slightly of cigar smoke. He chuckled to himself as he thought of the cop splattering himself and the van all over the front of the bank: what a dummy.

And the cop got into the back of the van, where it absolutely reeked of nitrogen fertilizer. Very carefully he examined the detonating mechanism and then turned the hands on the clock-face backwards about forty-five minutes, which would give him ample time to call the bomb squad and let them disarm the device. Then he stepped out of the van into the cold fresh air and watched the maniac driving away in his long, shiny Chrysler.

The maniac was driving carefully but quickly, obeying all the traffic laws, even though there wasn't another car or human being in sight. He drove down to the end of the block, paused briefly at the intersection, then drove down the next block, moving impatiently into the left turn lane. Harry Brown watched the left tail light blink once . . . twice . . . three times . . . and then the grey Chrysler exploded in a ball of orange flame.

Harry Brown tried to look surprised. "Another faulty carburetor, I guess," he said aloud, just to hear how the words sounded: very convincing, he thought. "Faulty carburetor," he said again. Very convincing.

And then he went to phone the bomb squad.

Deceit in the conduct of war outweighs valor and is worthy of merit.

—Machiavelli

Merit

by ISAK ROMUN

THE NIGHT OF THE ROBBERY OR THE RAID—CALL IT what you want—started out much like any other night in Maymyo. It was supertime at The Perch and after grace Colonel Puckfist, as usual, was the first to speak.

“Attention, men! News of the day. The YMCA man comes tonight. Next, I set up our tee time for Sunday. We shout fore at six. Get it, fore—at—six? Ha! And, oh yes, Saturday I want to go over the food money with the house mother. Set up a time, Frondeur!”

And he looked archly down the table till his eye rested on me, whose turn it was that month to administer the household accounts, keep the cook happy, dole out money for food and supplies, and make certain that the old Shan guard, who came with The Perch, didn’t rod off at night and let a bunch of Red Flag Communists or whatever, sneak up to the house and butcher us in our sleep.

This last possibility we usually joked about, the colonel letting one of his bellows fill the room, Major Duncery joining in with his high-pitched titter, and Chief Chauvin, the warrant officer, laughing only long enough to give him time to think of a scatological experience of which the circumstances reminded him. I usually laughed weakly if I had to (and generally I had to!). At the same time, I tried to hide my sense of estrangement from these other three members of the United States Army group into which I had been thrown (sometimes I thought, sentenced!) for a one-year tour in this remote Burmese hill station of Maymyo.

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The idea of The Perch being attacked by communists; of the white flag or Red Flag persuasion, was not as remote this week as it had been heretofore, and Nevins Puckfist, Lieutenant Colonel, Corps of Engineers, was less likely to joke and laugh about the possibility of having his wattled throat cut by some mischievous Marxist. Just that week, posters started going up in Maymyo. They were all crudely hand-drawn, but their message was clear. I saw the one that declared in imperfect English, below a representation of the United States shield, that "U.S. + K.M.T. KILLED LT. PETERS OF BURMA HERO."

Lieutenant Noel Peters was a Burma Air Force pilot who was shot down intercepting a KMT resupply plane. The plane had been parachuting food, weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies to the remnants of Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang troops pushed out of China in 1949 by Mao's communist soldiers. The KMT's had made a good thing of their sojourn in Burma. They controlled, among other things, the opium trade in their area and, as the years passed, showed a marked reluctance to return to China and join battle with their Red brothers.

Nonetheless, Chiang persisted in thinking of the KMT enclave in Burma as a sort of forward edge of the battle zone, a kickoff-point for the reinvasion of his China. He, therefore, diligently saw to its reprovisioning, a sort of fringe benefit for the KMT's who had drained the surrounding area of everything of worth, converting the locality into a virtual satrapy.

So, when Noel Peters shot down the plane from Taiwan and was killed for his efforts, there was general rejoicing in a Burma elated at having tweaked Chiang's nose and gotten a martyr thrown into the bargain. No matter that Peters was a Eurasian, a Christian who hadn't, in the popular, nationalistic style, Burmanized his name. When you don't have an arena of martyrs from which to choose, you take what you've got and make the best of it. Which is what the communist guerrillas were doing with the unfortunate lieutenant, transforming him into a virtual comrade and freedom fighter, a role that would have ill fit him had he been alive instead of being funeralized in Rangoon's St. Paul's Cathedral.

Anyway, as luck would have it, some KMT's carrying American weapons (courtesy of the Taiwan-based Chiang) were captured around the same time and this plus the Peters matter brought the communists out with paint pot and poster board. Overnight, Maymyo was plastered with anti-American signs. I saw a pair of them flanking the entrance to the bazaar and chose not to do the shopping that day. I sent my driver

in while I fidgeted outside the walled enclosure in the olive drab Volkswagen beetle provided by the Burma Army. There was a sub-machinegun under the driver's seat.

Back at The Perch, a platoon of Burma Army soldiers circled the house making the cook and his wife intensely nervous as the pair took an afternoon break in their quarters behind the house. But as Colonel Ba San, the area commander, declared earlier, nothing was going to happen to his U.S. guests, at least not during the term of the contract that his and their governments had worked out for the provision of American expertise to the training depots in the Maymyo area.

LOOKING AT COLONEL PUCKFIST AS HE SAT AT THE table, it was hard, I reflected, to associate him with any sort of expertise at all unless it was a kind of genius for moving food toward his mouth in such quantity that not all of it could fit, the remainder sticking to his lips, chin, and cheeks, a sort of three-dimensional menu for all to see. He and Major Elwin Duncery were assigned to the Burma Army Engineer Depot with the mission of training young Burmese soldiers to use the rehabilitated engineer equipment the Burma Army had bought from the United States. However, due perhaps to Burmese pride, they were never requested to provide training and they never thought to volunteer.

There assignment to the depot wasn't completely uneventful, however. The depot commander, Major Hla Thu, had an old, rusted Model-T Ford stuck off in one corner and he asked if the two Americans could work on it. This had an efficacious twofold effect: it relieved Major Hla Thu of having the Americans underfoot and provided them with an outsized Tinker Toy with which they could play. Of course, it never ran, the depot commander knew it never would, but it amused him to have these two grown men come panting up to him with exuberant promises of having the wreck on the road in another day or two.

Major Duncery, in particular, was very enthusiastic about the prospects of getting the Ford running. What he and Puckfist didn't know was that each night Major Hla Thu had one of his mechanics, flashlight in hand, steal out to the Ford and subtly sabotage it. This is how the depot commander knew that the vehicle would never run and that he'd have the two Americans out of his hair for a good long while.

But a good joke like that doesn't remain unknown for long, except to the persons upon whom played. I heard of the depot commander's artifice through my Burma Army counterparts at the service depot where I taught a Quartermaster Operations Course. At the table, now,

I thought of the well-known secret joke and found myself smiling at Puckfist and Duncery.

Duncery wasn't quite the distressing eater that Puckfist was. He didn't eat much, but of what he did eat, by far the greater part seemed to wedge itself between his teeth. This necessitated, at the meal's end, a good workout with a toothpick which to me, who had been brought up with a degree of delicacy, was a horrid, grating sight. What I, a non-engineer, failed to appreciate was the precision and design that Duncery introduced into the operation. As he unwedged each food morsel, he would wipe it off on the white tablecloth in perfect alinement with food morsels previously deposited. This he would do until the line was ten morsels long, no more, no less. Then, below, he would start a line of nine, each morsel of this new line covering the space between morsels of the previous line. This would go on, with added lines of diminishing length, till Duncery had, on good nights, an inverted pyramid of morsels. On *very* good nights, he might even manage, marvel of marvels, two pyramids, arranged tip to tip, each sharing a common apex-morsel. Everyone, except I, gazed admiringly at Duncery and he did this, with Puckfist evincing the greater interest, as would be expected of one engineer surveying the work of another.

I thought that I would surely turn into a hunchback because, to avoid looking at the others, I had long ago changed my own eating habits. Now, I literally loomed over my plate, my face a bare inch or two away from the food, thus curtailing my range of vision and shutting out the bad table manners of the others. When I occasionally looked up, I was sure to see something that would appall me.

Earlier at breakfast, for instance, Puckfist took his fork, dripping with yolk, out of his breakfast eggs, licked some but not all the yolk off, then plunged it into the jam jar. I sat stunned for a moment, then returned to my weak tea and toast, deciding that I would have the latter with butter alone. Later, I grabbed Augustine and Joseph, the Indian house boys, and told them in cold, precise terms that every, but *every*, serving dish, jar, bowl, or whatever would have a utensil. Later at lunch, the boys forgot an item or two and, when the other officers had motored off to work, I upbraided them again, threatening one or more forms of violence if they forgot or ignored my orders another time. At supper, then, the table was glorious with chandelier light reflecting off silver utensils stuck in all the serving china. Some pieces even had two serving tools. It didn't do any good, though; Puckfist went through the same routines in the morning, this time deftly maneuvering his gravy-laden fork so that it missed the serving spoon in the relish dish. Good

God! I thought and almost buried myself in my mashed potatoes.

Across the table, Chief Chauvin looked at me and asked, "You all right, Cap'n?"

"Fine. I'm fine," I hissed at my potatoes.

OF THE THREE, NICK CHAUVIN, A TRANSPORTATION specialist, was the least reprehensible, although he smoked big, black, smelly cigars and had an unhappy tendency to talk about bowel movements, their frequency, texture, excretive force, and the stimulation sometimes necessary to bring them on. This subject was, apparently, coming to life in Chauvin's mind at that very moment, for, as he puffed clouds of gagging smoke in my direction, the old warrant officer opined, "Seems you need a physic, Cap'n."

The Chief went on. "Mineral oil. Got all these other fancy things, but mineral oil still works best." He began drawing an intestine on the tablecloth. "Works this way. Pushes down on the waste matter, gets it all out, leaves you clean as a whistle. Never fails. Lubricates the system, too."

Then he proceeded to relate how he, as a mere stripling, had relieved his father's impacted bowels by large and frequent doses of mineral oil, and how—

"Good God!" I gasped, this time invoking aloud.

"What's wrong with you, Frondeur?" Colonel Puckfist demanded harshly. He and Major Duncery had been following Chief Chauvin's narration with interest and resented an interruption at a point clearly the climax.

"I'm thinking of those commie guerrillas, sir," I quickly improvised. "You know, Ba San took the platoon away just before supper and I don't think it'll be back tonight. What if—"

Chauvin's cigar sagged in his mouth and Duncery, in a tense, anxious voice, asked, "Why did he pull them off?"

Actually, the Burma Army platoon had been relieved because the provincial police had picked up all the local communists and the nearest guerrilla band had been reported far away from Maymyo, somewhere in the Shan States. However, only I, as security office for The Perch, had been informed, and I had neglected to pass the intelligence along to my housemates. So, in answer to Duncery, I expanded my original theme. "Oh, they went bounding off into the jungle when a report came in that a guerrilla band was getting ready to hit Maymyo. Rounded up every soldier in the area. Killing a gnat with boulders, that sort of thing."

"You mean, this place is entirely defenseless?" Chauvin inquired, his mind, at least temporarily, off the subject of bowels.

"I'm afraid so," I responded with a brave smile. "But don't worry, the BA troops will get those commies. Unless, of course, they run around the BA flank and double back here. They've done that sort of thing before. If that happens, well, I don't know." And I creased my face into a mask of concern.

"We could all be killed in our sleep," Duncery screamed. "Our throats slit and we wouldn't even know it!" he added as if knowing your throat was to be cut somehow made it less painful. From his side of the table, Chief Chauvin was energetically agreeing, his cigar countermoving in time to his feverish nodding.

However, Colonel Puckfist was made of stouter stuff, and he held up a calming hand. "Relax," he soothed, "the situation is under control. Remember that rock cave out back where we keep the beer?"

We all indicated we did.

"Well," the colonel went on, beaming at all, "I've set its iron door with a heavy lock. It would take a tank or a case of dynamite to get to us once we've locked ourselves in."

He was right. The door was fully two inches thick and set with heavy hinges imbedded in solid rock. The only things that had been missing were a good lock and hasp, and Colonel Puckfist had taken care of these when the guerrilla scare started. He had borrowed some welding equipment and other tools and in no time had mounted a heavy, bolted hasp on the door. Then he drew some house money, went to town, and purchased the sturdiest padlock he could find. There was one point, though, that the colonel had overlooked and I now took occasion to remind him of this. "Won't work," I said simply, then quickly added, "sir."

"What d'ya mean, it won't work?" Puckfist fired back indignantly.

"You want to be able to lock the door from the *inside*. The hasp and lock are on the *outside*."

Puckfist's chin dropped and Duncery started looking fearful again as Chauvin's cigar resumed its bouncing. Puckfist was the first to recover, brushing aside their fears and any creeping intimation he himself might have had that he was stupid. "Well, it seems we all have to do our duty when it's our time to do it. Who's the security officer this month?" he asked, knowing the answer beforehand.

"I am," I responded.

"Then, if necessary, you shall lock us in and let us out when the danger passes. That's part of your job as security officer."

"If I'm alive to let you out, that is," I said with convincing gloominess.

"There, there, my boy. Don't take such a pessimistic view," Puckfist counseled good-humoredly. "You're younger than the rest of us and can surely run a lot faster. Besides, you have a pistol."

"How about, sir, if I give you the pistol?" I suggested, intrigued at how well I had fallen in with my own deception. "You're the senior officer. Shouldn't you be out here like—well, like a captain going down with his ship?"

Puckfist was horrified. He shook his wattles from side to side and shouted, "I'm not in the Navy!" The matter was closed and it was clear that the colonel wanted to get to other things.

Duncery, whose efficiency report was rendered by Puckfist, was quick to oblige with an updated account of their progress with the Model-T and how, under Colonel Puckfist's guidance, they should have the vehicle on the road and running in a day or two. During this replay, Chauvin and I were wordlessly fidgety, but Puckfist sat back entranced with Duncery's report. Only the unexpected entrance of Bourgeois, the cook, with a special dessert (if it had not been special, one of the house boys would have carried it in) interrupted the smooth and endless flow of Duncery's witlessness.

BOURGEOIS (OUR NAME FOR HIM BECAUSE HIS WAS beyond pronunciation) bore a large tray upon which, resting on four carefully arranged linen napkins, were fifteen to twenty glistening, almost transparent strips. When, with impressive ceremony, he set the tray down, we saw that the glistening was caused by the application of a fine coating of sugar on each strip. But we couldn't tell what the sugar was covering.

"What is it?" asked Puckfist, unmindful of a dribble starting down his chin.

"*Kyauk-hpa-yon-thi yoh*," replied Bourgeois with great dignity.

"Good Lawd, whassat?" Chauvin exclaimed. "That gook talk always throws me."

Casting a reproachful glance at the warrant officer, Bourgeois explained, "Candied pumpkin."

"That's all?" said Chauvin, taking a piece, as did everyone else. After he had chewed his piece awhile, he conceded, "But good." We all agreed, and Bourgeois went back to the kitchen.

When the door closed on the cook, I said, "You shouldn't use that word 'gook,' Chief."

"Now, don't start on me again, Cap'n," Chauvin retorted. "You

know, and so does Bourgeois, that I don't mean nothing by it. I care a lot for that little bugger. It's just the same as calling a colored folk back home a nigra. They know we mean them no harm and they love us for it."

I felt like clarifying that point with this question: *They love you because you call them nigras or because you mean them no harm?* Instead, I asked, "You really believe they like being called nigras?"

"I said so, didn't I?" Chauvin replied huffily, "And as long as gooks are the way they are, they'll be gooks."

"How's that, Chief?" I tried to sound as if I really wanted to understand.

"You know how, Cap'n! This ain't the first time you been in this part of the world. Like those two gook monks today—"

"Pyongis? Buddhist priests?"

"Yeah, gook priests. Well, they come up to the house this afternoon begging."

"That's a way of life with them," I explained. "We've always let Bourgeois put some rice in their bowls. Buddhists believe you gain merit when you give to a *pyongi*."

"Well, they didn't have no bowls today!" Chauvin bawled back. "They was asking for money."

"Money? But why?"

"They're building a school right here in Maymyo, and they need money." Chauvin looked triumphant. "Claim they want to learn the kids pure Buddhism."

"So?" I was unconcerned.

"So? You know they're not even going to teach English in that school?"

Puckfist looked up from his consumption of the candied pumpkin. "What did you tell them, Chiefnick?" (That was a cute name the engineers used for Chauvin, a combination of parts of his military grade and first name.)

"I said no sirree bob, they don't get no money from me until they drag themselves up into the twentieth century." Puckfist and Duncery applauded soundlessly.

"Like teaching English?" I asked.

"Right. They should get with it. Let's face it, English is the language of the world. Of intelligent people of the world, anyway. Non-gooks, that is."

"Good for you, Chiefnick," Puckfist and Duncery said in near unison.

I continued my questions. "So, you sent them away?"

Chauvin smiled. "Not without hope. Told them to come back when they figured out why birds fly south."

"A riddle. You gave them a riddle?" My eyebrows went up. "Burmese don't understand our riddles. Besides, I'm not at all sure birds migrate south in this country."

"Anyway, told them if they could give me the right answer, I might reconsider and give them some money." Chauvin looked at Puckfist and added with finality, "I wouldn't, though, give them no money nohow."

"Hey, speaking of money," Puckfist threw in between pumpkin strips, "don't forget the YMCA man is coming tonight. They want to build that new center. How much is each of you coughing up?"

I dreaded this. I had nothing against the YMCA here in Maymyo, but neither did I have any great enthusiasm for it. There were too many other outstretched hands, less well off than the YMCA, that money should go into. But I saw no way of getting out of making at least a token donation in order to avoid looking like a horse's ass. On the other hand, I hated myself for being dragooned into making a contribution I didn't care to make. So, in answer to Puckfist, I said sullenly, "I'll give twenty *kyat*." This was the equivalent of five dollars, more or less a cent or two.

"Chiefnick, Major Duncery, and I are each giving a hundred," Puckfist reminded, revealing that his question had been directed solely at me.

"That's nice, colonel," I replied, "but, remember, I put a fifty *kyat* bill into the collection basket *every* Sunday at church." This was a gentle reminder that the others slept in or were out on the golf course each Sunday morning.

After that, we went into the living room to wait for the YMCA man. Augustine brought in three cups and a pot of coffee. For me, he made an extra trip for a cup of tea.

We sat there for over an hour, I trying to read, Duncery once more spewing out nonsense on what was apparently his sole topic, the Model-T, and Chauvin leaning back, filling the room with an overcast of white cigar smoke.

About nine o'clock, I rose, took a twenty *kyat* note from my wallet, and held it out to Puckfist. "Here's my share, sir. Give it to him when he comes, please."

Puckfist looked at his watch. "I don't think he is going to come tonight. Said he'd be here at eight. Look, why don't we all give the

money to you. You sleep downstairs, and if the YMCA man comes tonight, you can answer the door and give the money to him. Make sure you get a receipt for my hundred."

I collected the money reluctantly. Puckfist had screwed me again by making certain that if anyone was to be disturbed it would be me. I watched the others go upstairs, then I went outside to check the Shan guard. The guard was there and, at least while I was watching, seemed quite alert.

After that, I locked the front door and went into my room. I reminded myself that, in any case, I would be up for a while yet. I had to write my wife and parents and, then, because I was trying desperately to push my way through *Crime and Punishment*, I had vowed to read at least fifty pages of Dostoyevsky's matted prose before going to bed.

AROUND MIDNIGHT, I HEARD THE GUARD CALL OUT. It was a prearranged signal I had set up with him. I quickly got up from my desk, strapped on my pistol, and went outside. The guard was pointing down the long driveway leading up to The Perch. I strained my eyes and saw the outlines of two figures moving toward the house, slightly lighter patches against the blue-green of moonlit trees. The guard raised his gun but I gently pressed it down till it pointed at the ground.

From inside the house, I heard a voice. It was Puckfist's. "What is it, Frondeur? What's going on out there?"

I thought for just an instant. Then, I drew my pistol and ran into the house, carefully setting my face in a distraught expression. "My God! It is the guerrillas," I cried to the three pajamaed figures standing on the stairwell. "They must have doubled back, just as you said they would, colonel."

Puckfist probably had no recollection of saying this—because he hadn't. However, he wasn't about to dispute the point just then. Instead, he ran into his room, emerging a moment later holding a large key. In an in-charge voice, he ordered Duncery and Chauvin, "Come on, men. Follow me. To the cave! Let's go!"

And the three of them scuttled down the stairs and toward the rear of the house, I following leisurely behind. They ran out the back door, through the kitchen, detached from the house, and over to the cave. Puckfist unlocked the heavy, iron door and Chauvin and Duncery struggled to open it. The colonel thrust the key and padlock in my hand. "Lock us in and let us out as soon as the trouble blows over."

"Yes, sir!" I said smartly and threw him a crisp salute.

Puckfist didn't appear to be sure whether, under the circumstances, he should return the courtesy, so he just shuffled into the cave after the others. A second later he stuck his head out. "And, Frondeur," the colonel muttered, "uh, good luck, lad. Now hurry up and close that damn door. Please!"

I holstered the pistol and, with help from inside the cave, pushed the door shut and snapped the large lock on the hasp. I hefted the key in my hand a few times, then reared back and threw it far into the jungle growth surrounding the house.

I went around the house, rather than through it, and came to its front where the Shan guard, joined now by Bourgeois, was watching the figures, that I had previously spotted, drawing nearer.

I GOT UP THE NEXT MORNING AND BREAKFASTED ALONE, reading *Crime and Punishment* which, because of my determination, had gripped me so that I could not put down the book. I noticed that I sat up straight, not hunched over as usual. I sat there for a long while, after finishing my bacon and eggs, drinking tea and occasionally spreading my toast with strawberry jam, which I noted, with satisfaction, came from a fresh jar that had a serving spoon stuck in it.

Finally, I closed the book on its last page and went to the telephone in the living room. I picked it up and waited for the operator. The operator came on and I gave him the number of the commander of the engineer training depot. When I heard the Burmese officer's voice, I said, "Major Hla Thu, this is Felix Frondeur. Captain Frondeur, right. You know, I live in the same house with your Colonel Puckfist and Major Duncery. Well, last night a strange thing happened here."

I FINISHED LUNCH, DABBED AT MY MOUTH WITH A napkin, and rose from the table to go out back and see how the soldiers were doing with the lock.

They had it almost off. I saw Major Hla Thu standing off to one side questioning Bourgeois and watching his men work on the lock. I went over to him and said, "I didn't realize you were out here, Major. Care for lunch? We have plenty. I don't imagine they'll be too interested in eating right away when they get out of there."

The young major turned and smiled. "No food, thank you, Captain. I just came out to see how my men are doing. You were pretty vague on the phone. Just what *did* happen out here last night?"

"Guerrillas, major, about ten of them," I replied. "Held up both the

guard and me. Gave us a choice between giving up our money or our lives. Well, of course, that was no choice at all. I scurried about emptying pockets and wallets trying to find as much money as I could. I'm afraid they even took some three hundred and twenty *kyat* we had collected for the YMCA in town, in addition to everything else. They tied up the guard and me. Then Bourgeois, our cook, released us this morning a short while before I called you."

"And they," Hla Thu nodded toward the cave door, "and they locked themselves in to be safe. But who in the world would put the lock on the outside if he were going to use the cave for the purpose planned?"

"Colonel Puckfist."

"Aha!" And the depot commander nodded understandingly. "The, ah, guerrillas took the key, too?"

"Yes. They seemed to enjoy this when they found out what it was for."

Hla Thu laughed, then said reflectively, "Of course, we had no report of a band in this area."

"It was a small band. As I said, about ten. Maybe less."

The Burmese officer laughed again and again. He couldn't seem to control his good spirits. Finally, he said, "Yes, that is always possible and, believe me, I'll back you up one hundred percent on that point. This episode is even better than the little game I play with the Ford. Ah, I see the lock is off."

The door, pulled back, revealed three ragged figures that were also very dirty. Apparently, the imprisoned men had started drinking the beer to slake their thirsts or while away the time, unthinking of the effect that the beer, coupled with their prolonged detention, would have on their urinary tracts. The small cave smelled like a field latrine.

Puckfist stormed out of the cave and went right for me. "Frondeur, how come you didn't let us out before this? And where's that damned key?"

"Colonel, please calm down," Hla Thu interjected. "Captain Frondeur acted quite prudently and correctly. He has gained much merit for his actions last night. He paid off the guerrillas, thereby saving all your lives. You sir, owe him *your* life. We'll tell you all about it later. Right now, I'm sure you're anxious for a wash." The Burmese officer looked at the condition of Puckfist's pajamas and wrinkled his nostrils every so slightly.

Puckfist seemed mollified, if confused, as he and his two companions tramped toward the house.

As Chauvin passed, I touched him lightly on the arm. The warrant officer turned. "Chief, one of those guys knew you," I said. "He told me to tell you 'because it's too far to walk.' "

"What the Sam Hill you talking about, Cap'n?" the uncomfortable Chauvin asked. He probably had not heard one of my words.

"I don't know. I thought you'd know."

"Well, I don't know!" Chauvin snapped, then turned and stalked into the house.

Bourgeois, standing nearby, looked at me with warm, respectful eyes. I had not noted this in the cook before. But, come to think of it, the Shan guard had looked at me in the very same manner before going off duty that morning.

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His mother was dead, and her demise had occurred at an extremely inconvenient time. He'd have to do something about that!

Two Peas in a Pod

by JEAN DARLING

BETWEEN EIGHT AND EIGHT-FIFTEEN, FIVE DAYS A WEEK, year in and year out, Elmer Rudd read the newspaper while eating breakfast. The menu never varied: scrambled eggs, buttered wheat toast and coffee. Melanie, his mother, sat at the opposite end of the table talking non-stop except for the intake of food or breath and, as Elmer rarely listened to a word she said, his mental computer had been programmed to fill all such pauses with: "ummm" or "uh-huh" or "my, my, you don't say" with the occasional "well, well" thrown in for good measure.

On this particular May morning, however, the routine was interrupted by the sound of a fork clattering to the linoleum, a soft

thud—then silence. After a while, the length of the silence deactivated the automatic switch-off in his head and hearing as keen as a bird dog's returned. "Yes, Mother, I'm listening," he said, not looking up from the newspaper.

When there was no answer he ventured, "Please, Mel, go on with what you were saying." Still there was no answer. By now he was vaguely disturbed by the stoppage of Melanie's usual wall-to-wall voice, so he moved the paper to one side. The reason his mother had stopped talking was obvious. She was slumped face down on the table.

"Oh no, Mel, not this morning." Although Mrs. Rudd did not make a practice of putting her face in the scrambled eggs, her often bizarre ploys to get attention had made Elmer skeptical of any strange behaviour on her part. And still hoping she would straighten up and fly right, he went, on, "This is no time for games. I have to leave early to get the bus because Tony's not picking me up this morning. He's baby-sitting his kids while Margie's at the hospital having number five." He was referring to the work-mate who collected him every morning for the ten-mile drive to the office where they processed orders for building materials.

Out of patience now, Elmer threw down the paper, rounded the table and touched her on the shoulder. "Please, mother, come on. Be a good girl." She didn't move. "Okay, we'll do it your way. Here I'll help you." He lifted her to an upright position. Melanie's head flopped against the back of the chair. "Mother?" Elmer said, his brow creased by growing concern.

He felt her throat for a pulse. There was none. Next, a hand mirror was fetched to be held in front of her open mouth. When its surface remained clear, Elmer felt a sickening lurch in his insides. "You can't have gone and died on me," he accused as he carried Mrs. Rudd into her room.

"I'll call a doctor," he said, arranging her beneath a quilt on the bed. "Oh what's his number—wait, wait—I know, it's on the card in the drawer." But when the drawer in the desk was opened, all thoughts of calling the doctor were blotted out by the sight of the wills. Over the years dozens of them had been drafted as Elmer waxed and waned in his mother's good books. Though why she felt the small annuity left by her father held any real bargaining power remained a mystery. The house, of course, was in her name but, as he had paid off the mortgage, it rightfully should be Elmer's.

He sorted the contents of the drawer onto the desk: the card with all the urgent phone numbers, mortgage receipts, hospitalization,

insurance, his will and Melanie's wills bundled together by a rubber band in chronological order. Her lawyer, Martin Sloan, had tried to make her destroy the outdated ones but Melanie liked keeping wills almost as much as she liked making them.

On reading the latest edition, Elmer found he had been ousted in favor of some kookie sect called the Holy I, a phase she was going through like the fortune tellers or bogus charities named as former beneficiaries.

His first instinct was to tear it to smithereens so that its predecessor leaving everything to him would be valid. But as Martin Sloan had drawn up this latest bit of idiocy, any such measure would be pointless. Though, to give the man his due, he had told her she was being unfair, especially as her son carried a fifty-thousand dollar insurance policy to ensure her welfare should he meet an untimely death.

Suddenly, Elmer recalled the reason for having gone to the desk. *The doctor, I have to call the doctor*, he thought, running a finger down the card that listed important phone numbers. Then he remembered reading about a man who had been declared dead by a doctor. And it was only years later when the coffin was opened for some reason or other that it was discovered the poor soul had been buried alive. Thinking Mrs. Rudd might have recovered, Elmer hurried to her side. Once more the pulse was checked; the mirror was held to her mouth. There was no change and Elmer wept.

WHEN AT LAST THE TEARS WERE FINISHED, HE REALIZED the office should be called. His boss did not take kindly to employees clocking in late for work. Call the doctor and the office, repeated itself in his mind like a nursery rhyme as he turned and inadvertently caught his reflection in the mirror on the half-open closet door. It was at that moment the idea struck.

Standing there in the dim light—Mrs. Rudd always kept the shades drawn on fine days—the resemblance to his mother was uncanny. Even the discrepancy in their ages had been minimized by Elmer's bouts of periodic drinking. It was because of the strong resemblance of son to mother that his father left home in Elmer's seventh year. "Look at him, he's the image of you and one is enough! It's as though a bit of you separated and became a child. He's no son of mine by nature or looks and I wash my hands of the both of you," the man had said and having thus relieved himself, Rudd decamped, never to be heard of again.

But for all the hurt he had bequeathed his son by the cruelty of his denial, Rudd had been right. Mother and son were as like as two peas in

a pod: sparse hair the color of tobacco stains, near-sighted watery blue eyes eternally shielded by spectacles that shrank them to the size of pin-pricks, bodies shaped like little planks—yes, they were an almost identical pair. Even their height varied by a bare half-inch in Elmer's favor. The only way they differed was in weight. Melanie had fleshed out since becoming a follower of the Holy I. The high priest or guru or whatever he called himself liked his "hand-maidens" plump, Mrs. Rudd had told Elmer a while back when first she had fallen under the spell of the obscure sect.

Fortunately, it is easier to add weight than to lose it so, after pinning a bath towel around his middle, Rudd slipped into his mother's housecoat. The horn-rimmed glasses he affected were exchanged for his mother's spare harlequins. The fact that she always wore a wig simplified the transformation. He looked from his reflection to the woman on the bed. It was like seeing double. Without any further consideration Elmer decided to become his own mother—part time, after a short period of preparation.

FIRST THING WAS TO CALL WORK USING AN APPROXIMATION of his mother's voice to say Elmer had a cold and would be out the rest of the week. This gave him Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday to prepare for his first public appearance as Melanie. He would attend the Sunday afternoon service of the Holy I held in the Victorian mansion where his mother had been going since before Christmas. It would be a good way to make his debut in the new role.

Though Melanie Rudd was laid to rest in the back yard behind the shed under cover of dark, her departure was not unmarked by ceremony. For the rest of Wednesday and all day Thursday she lay in state with candles at the head and foot of her bed. Flowers were scattered on the quilt that covered her. Elmer read passages from the Bible and sang hymns. Before the burial, her glasses and wig were removed, the latter to be dispatched to the beauty parlor for its regular Friday refurbishing. "One always needs at least two wigs, one to wear while the other is getting done," Elmer recalled his mother saying almost every Friday. It was the regularity of the repetition of everything Melanie said that had driven her son to close his ears to her everlasting chatter. Still, as the first day passed Rudd realized much of his mother's conversation had penetrated.

Once the woman was out of the way work began on copying her handwriting and generally getting used to speaking, walking and thinking like his mother. Though the girl who answered the phone at the office accepted his voice as that of Mrs. Rudd, Elmer found some

old tape recording she had made of several poems she fancied. For hours on end he listened, recorded and listened again until every nuance was perfect. Equally as diligent about the handwriting, Rudd filled every blank sheet of paper with the small careful script favored by his mother. Over and over again he signed "Melanie Rudd" exactly as it appeared on the bottom of the wills. It was while forming the curlique on an M that Elmer decided to do away with himself.

HE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY HE HADN'T THOUGHT of it before. If Elmer Rudd died, Melanie Rudd would inherit the \$50,000.00 insurance. With that much money he could begin again somewhere else. Perhaps some girl would find him attractive marry him even and have children. Of course, he would have to leave the country as Melanie but when he got to wherever it was he could throw away the wigs and dresses and be himself. The sudden shrilling of the doorbell froze Elmer to the chair.

After a moment a flood of questions released him to rush to a mirror to check wig, glasses, lipstick. Who was it? Why would anyone want to see Melanie at 9:20 on Friday morning. Then came the heart-stopping thought that it might be the police. Some nosy-Parker neighbor might have reported unusual activity in the Rudd's back yard during the wee hours.

Running lightly upstairs, he tried to catch sight of the caller through the slats of the Venetian blind on the landing window. The angle was wrong. The bell sounded again more urgently. "Go away, I'm not ready," Elmer hissed under his breath while rechecking his appearance in the closet mirror. Why hadn't he put out the pad and pencil the way his mother had done when she didn't want to be bothered—the one marked: SORRY I'M OUT. PLEASE LEAVE A NOTE. When a third even more demanding ring sounded, Elmer opened the door.

"Yes?" he said to the well-dressed, grey-haired man looking down at him.

"I hope I haven't caught you at an awkward time."

"I was lying down—migraine," Elmer offered to excuse the delay.

"In that case I won't keep you. I just stopped by to see if you were alright. Sister Lorene and I were worried when you weren't at the discussion period yesterday."

"Just the headache—it's a bit better today," Elmer said, relieved that it was not the fuzz and pleased that the masquerade was going so well with Melanie's "guru."

"Would you like me to call Elmer to come home and stay with you?" The voice oozed sympathetic concern.

"Oh no, no, I'll be fine," Rudd answered, panicked by the sudden realization that whatever was going to happen to Elmer would have to happen *poste haste*.

"All right then." He patted Elmer's cheek. "Sister will stop by tomorrow morning to see how you are. We can't have our little hand maidens getting sick you know. See you at the Sunday meeting."

AS ELMER WAS NOT ONE TO LET THE GRASS GROW UNDER his feet, he set out that very night to find a likely substitute for himself. All that he had to do was stay sober in the area usually chosen for tying on one of his periodic benders—the rundown neighborhood near the railroad tracks frequented by dropouts, drunks, addicts and other flotsam of small town New Jersey life. Surely, there would be one among them who was not too unlike Rudd.

Later, scrubbed and rewrapped in Melanie's housecoat, he waited to be notified that Elmer had been found dead in an alley. Though tired he felt no remorse at having killed the thirtyish man with hair the color of tobacco stains. He felt no guilt at using a rock to blue the features beyond recognition. The only part of the exercise that had given him pause was exchanging clothes with the dead man—the fear of discovery before the switch, including wrist watch and signet ring, had been made. Then, coming home had been a bit hairy in case someone might see him alive when, to all intents and purposes, Elmer Rudd lay dead—the victim of a mugger. As sure as little pigs had curly tails the body would be robbed by the time it was discovered.

It was morning before a police sergeant came to tell Melanie the tragic news. Sister Lorene arrived close on his heels and accompanied the bereaved to the morgue. Tears came easily, whether of relief that it was over or a son's sorrow for a mother's passing. Whatever the reason, the tears were real and copious and Elmer was grateful for the help given by Sister Lorene and Brother Jonathan, as the tall grey-haired man was called. They took care of all the funeral arrangements including the cremation as soon as the body was released. Inquest, reading of the will, depositing of the \$50,000.00 to Melanie Rudd's bank account all went without a hitch. Autumn came and Elmer decided the time had come for him to fold his tent like the Arabs and silently steal away—if he could get rid of the duo from the Holy I.

All summer one or the other of them had been at his elbow to such an extent, Elmer grew suspicious of their motives. Especially since Melanie Rudd had named the Church of the Holy I as beneficiary. Now, with \$50,000.00 to sweeten the kitty there was no telling when impatience would outweigh prudence and he could wake up to find himself really dead.

Besides, all the mincing around like a woman was driving him nuts. That and the fact that he was long past due for a bout with the hard stuff.

He could taste it in his mouth, feel the craving in his belly. When the need was as urgent as the one Elmer now felt, he couldn't think straight let alone make sensible plans for the future. But returning to the old haunts near the railroad was out of the question. Perhaps a short trip across the Hudson River to New York City to still the thirst wouldn't be too risky. Of course he couldn't go as Melanie—not with having to shave twice daily to keep the cheeks smoothly lady-like. He would leave town wearing her old black dress; take a small suitcase and change into a suit in Penn Station. The case could be left in a lock box.

For a moment he wondered about the reaction to a man coming out of one of the cubicles in the Ladies' john; then the thought was dismissed. One often needed a program to tell male from female. There would be no reaction.

BY THE TIME ELMER REACHED TIMES SQUARE THREE days after the change back to his masculine self, his legs were rubber, the sidewalk a rippling, capricious sea. Even the wall against which he leaned heaved sickeningly. Then someone was peering into his face and "Elmer—Elmer? Is that you?" came from a distance through the fog. And then he was lurching towards the familiar voice and a man's arm was around him and he felt himself being eased into a taxicab.

When the blue did begin to lump itself together into recognizable objects, Elmer saw he was in a room that looked as though it was being readied for the painters. Furniture was clumped in the center of the floor, rugs were rolled against the wall.

"It's okay, dad, I just want him out of here before the kids get home from the park," a woman's voice crept through the ringing in Elmer's ears.

"Soon as I get the coffee in him we'll be out of here, I promise you. Just put the pot on the table," a man answered. A door closed. "So you're in the land of the living again. Oh God, I didn't mean that—that's an awful pun." With difficulty Elmer focused on what seemed to be a face hovering in the near distance. "Here get this in you, it'll make you feel better," the mouth said.

"No, no—don't-wan coffee—a drink—need-a-drink." Rudd struck out. Hot liquid spilled over his hand.

"Whether you want to or not you've got to drink it; it'll sober you up. I tried to get your mother on the phone—there was no answer."

"Course she's out—I'm not home."

"God, it was a shock seeing you there when everyone was so positive

you were dead. I couldn't believe my eyes. Come on, drink it, we can't stay—"

"Get-dit away—It's a drink I need," Rudd interrupted, trying to get up and falling sideways over an end table. The man settled him back into the chair. "Hey, wait a mi-mit, you're Marm Sloam—Movver's lawyer." He grinned, pleased to have identified his mentor.—But you're in Hacken—Hackensack."

"Crazy running into you—I haven't been in New York in a month of Sundays—"

"Marn Sloam tried to phone Movver. And Movver doesn't live there anymore." Elmer laid a finger by the side of his nose, a sly glint in his eye. "Gimme a li'l drink. I'll tell you a secret about Movver. She's—she's—"

"What secret, Elmer?" Martin Sloan humored him. But the only answer was the drunken wagging of a finger. "Like I was saying—it's unbelievable my finding you like I did—I'm never in Times Square during the day and if I hadn't had to see a client before matinee—"

"Cut the crap an' gimme a drink," Elmer roared. "And stop about my Movver. When I get home she will be there and not until. Can't you get that through your stupid head? Where are we anyway?" He looked around the unfamiliar room with the strange tall object he now identified as a ladder standing, legs apart, near the window.

"My daughter Jamie's apartment on East 72nd Street and we can't stay—but I didn't know where else to take you in your condition."

As Sloan talked the awful realization dawned. His mother's lawyer knew he was alive—all hopes of finding a new life was gone. And worse—the \$50,000.00 would have to be returned.

"This stuff's cold—just rest there; I'll be right back with some hot coffee." Sloan moved toward the door carrying the tray.

"No—don't go—" Danger signals flashed. Elmer couldn't remember what he had said about Melanie but one thing he did know: Sloan must not leave the room. He must not be allowed to call the police. "No!" Rudd shouted and lunged toward the lawyer knocking him off balance into the ladder which toppled to the floor. "No!" Elmer screamed, pounding the fallen man's head against the parquet. "You can't call the police. I didn't kill her!"

Next thing a woman was pulling him away and screaming that her father was dead.

Then the police were there asking questions that Elmer couldn't answer because his mind was busy wondering why, when Melanie had died, he hadn't called the doctor and trusted to luck that her will could be broken.

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Herrigan recognized her at once. By the characteristic way she rotated her heel as she began to walk, as if she were grinding some despised object into the ground. By the set of her shoulders, the tilt of her head, her smile. Millicent, who was dead. Or should be dead.

Split Personalities

by JOHN LUTZ

"I SAW MILLICENT THIS MORNING WHILE I WAS DRIVING TO work," Herrigan said to his fellow warehouseman George Foyt.

Foyt, who was filling an order in the same aisle as Herrigan, paused in his labor, holding a case of canned peas in midair with one huge toil-calloused hand. "Milly's been dead almost six months now," he said. "How could you have seen her?"

"I don't know," Herrigan said. "I only know I saw her. She was standing waiting for a bus when I drove past. I stopped the car and backed up, but she'd already boarded with a lot of other passengers and the bus pulled away. There was no way I could cross two lanes of traffic and follow it. No way I could keep up. But I saw her, George. I gotta believe my eyes."

Foyt shook his head and resumed working, handling heavy cases of groceries as if they were empty. "Your eyes can fool you. I seen 'em fool plenty of guys that drank or did dope."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Herrigan snapped.

"You been using coke. I know because I been with you when you bought it. And you've been buying more and more the last few weeks. And you've been drinking more booze. It ain't none of my business. You were

looking for an explanation and I'm suggesting one, is all. Dope and drink has caused a lot of guys to see things stranger than their dead wives. Or to think they seen 'em."

"It wasn't drink. It wasn't dope. It was Millicent."

Foyt straightened and looked at Herrigan almost with pity. "Listen, we're friends. I want to help, is all. What I'm saying is what you and everyone else knows. Too much of the stuff you've been taking can get you a little paranoid, at least temporarily. If you keep at it you'll get that way permanently. You'll become a schizofrantic or something."

"That's schizophrenic!"

"Whatever."

"You guys down there—more work and less talk!"

It was Smathers the supervisor yelling at them, standing at the head of the aisle with his arms crossed. Who did he think he was, the captain of the *Bounty*? Herrigan hated Smathers. He hated his job.

He got to work, glancing at Foyt, who was smiling. Employment here was enough to drive the strongest man crazy, Herrigan thought. You had to keep moving constantly, and when you tried to make conversation some jerk like Smathers shouted at you to shut your mouth. And the warehouse was cold and damp and gray. Sure, the place could drive someone into becoming a schizofrantic. Herrigan had to get out of here, and as soon as the job market opened up, he would. He promised himself.

He didn't admit to Foyt that their conversation had made him feel better, had injected a bit of hardheaded reality into the situation. Foyt was right about one thing: Millicent was dead. Her car had skidded off the road in a storm and caromed two-hundred feet into a gully and then burned. Millicent's seat belt was still buckled when they found her charred remains. No one was ever dead.

THE NEXT DAY, *THE VERY NEXT DAY*, HERRIGAN AGAIN saw her boarding the bus. This time he got a good look at her, and all doubt disappeared. It was Millicent. She was wearing a light tan raincoat pulled tight around her waist with a belt. She might have put on a few pounds in the past six months, but only a few. Herrigan was even close enough to see the familiar expression in her large green eyes as she stepped up into the bus. And she had the same way of tossing her long red hair after lowering her head. Everything was the same. A man knew his own wife, dead or alive.

Herrigan pulled his car to the curb and watched the bus disappear in traffic. His hands were trembling, perspiring. He realized that his forehead was cold with sweat. He waited for the traffic light to change,

made a right turn, then a left at the next block. He ran a red light, almost hitting a pedestrian. Ignoring the man's waving and cursing, Herrigan made another squealing left turn.

He was back at the main street the bus had been on. He turned right, maneuvered into the fast lane and saw the rear of the bus, with its exhaust-stained liquor advertisement, a block or so ahead. He settled back comfortably, made himself relax, and followed the bus, studying the passengers who got off at stops along the way.

Millicent got off the bus at Lancaster Avenue and began walking. Herrigan parked his car, hurriedly fed silver into a meter and followed her, elbowing people out of the way when necessary to keep her in sight.

She entered a large office building at Third and Lancaster. Herrigan stood outside and watched through the glass doors as she stood in the lobby for a few minutes then stepped into a crowded elevator. He ran inside and stared up at the lighted numerals indicating the floor the elevator was on.

The elevator stopped at the twelfth floor and stayed there. Herrigan pressed the down button. The elevator descended, made one stop on the fifth floor, then arrived at lobby level. Its doors glided open. A man in a trenchcoat stepped out, glanced at Herrigan and then hustled through the lobby and out the street door.

So Millicent was on the twelfth floor. Herrigan consulted the building directory. The entire twelfth floor was occupied by Pier Seven Imports. Millicent had come here yesterday and today, at the same times. Apparently she was working at Pier Seven Imports.

Herrigan went to a pay phone, looked up the import company's number and dialed.

"May I talk to Millicent, please?" he said to the woman who answered.

"There is no one named Millicent in the office," she said. "Are you certain you dialed the right number, sir?"

"She's a redhead, medium height, very slender. Millicent Herrigan! I know she works there!"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, there's no Millicent Harrison with the company."

"Not Harrison! Herrigan—I-G-A-N!"

"There is no Millicent here, sir."

"Listen, you!"

"I'm sorry, sir." She hung up.

FOR A WHILE HERRIGAN STOOD TREMBLING. THEN HE

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diald another number, the warehouse's, and reported in sick for the day. Smathers didn't believe him and made some crack about Herrigan taking too much of his medicine. Herrigan was polite even as he stood there hating Smathers so intensely that he was painfully squeezing the receiver with whitened knuckles. People like Smathers, just who did they think they were?

Herrigan went back to his car. He got a ball-point pen from the glove compartment, unscrewed the pen's cap and saw that it contained plenty of soft white powder. He clipped the pen in his shirt pocket and drove to a service station, where he parked near the street and went into the men's room. He locked the door of the rest room, went into a stall and did three lines of cocaine, using the special pen as a straw so he could snort without losing a grain of the expensive snowy powder. Feeling reinforced and rejuvenated, he returned to his car.

He sat for a long time in the parked car, watching the building's glass doors to see if Millicent left. Then he decided that she wouldn't emerge until noon. For lunch. He drove a few blocks away, until he saw a bar that suited him, went inside and sat in a booth near the grease-spattered window. It was a restful place to sip beer and watch the endless parade of pedestrians on the busy downtown avenue. Many of those who passed seemed aloof and preoccupied, vaguely confused, as if even they themselves weren't quite sure who they were.

At ten minutes to twelve he was parked again outside the building housing Pier Seven Imports. The stream of people passing from the building grew heavier around noon, slacked off about twelve fifteen. Herrigan was unable to catch sight of his dead wife.

All right, so she ate lunch at her desk. Or maybe the building had a cafeteria. It occurred to Herrigan then that he was wasting his time. If she boarded the bus where he'd seen her the past two mornings, surely she was living in the neighborhood and got off the bus at the same stop.

Herrigan had more time to kill. He returned to the bar, where he sipped more beer and counted minutes. Time passed slowly, but in disjointed fashion.

THAT EVENING, AT FIVE THIRTY-FIVE, HERRIGAN WATCHED Millicent get off the bus. He took a final pull on the bottle he'd brought with him, climbed out of his parked car and followed her.

She walked fast, as if in a hurry to get home, never once glancing behind her. Yet Herrigan had the suspicion that somehow she knew he was there, matching her pace for pace like a trailing shadow.

She entered an apartment building on Rappaport Street. Herrigan hurried across the street, noticing for the first time that it was raining

rather hard, and entered the vestibule in time to see the curve of her ankle as she turned the corner at the first landing and disappear up the stairs. He reached the second floor just as her apartment door was swinging shut. He heard the click of the latch, the snick of a lock.

The building was old. It smelled of years of cooking odors, stale urine and lonely despair. Multicolored graffiti gave life to the faded walls. Herrigan searched the graffiti for some pertinent message but found none. He walked down the hall and knocked on Millicent's door.

There was a pause while the locks were manipulated. Though one of them was a heavy chain lock, for some reason she chose not to use it, instead flung the door open wide and stood staring out at him. She was still in her dress but was wearing pink slippers edged with white artificial fur. As she studied Herrigan, his wet clothes and his hair plastered to his forehead, the expression on his face, her eyes sprang wide in alarm. Then she became oddly calm, almost resigned.

Herrigan smiled and said, "Hello, Milly."

She began to answer. Her lower jaw dropped as if suddenly unhinged. But no sound came out. Herrigan drew the half-full bottle of bourbon from his pocket and struck her hard on the side of the head. She whined and staggered backward. He followed, struck her again in the same spot and she slumped to a sitting position on the worn carpet and gazed up at him with eyes that wouldn't focus. He raised the bottle and brought it down again and again, with increasing force, until it shattered.

Herrigan didn't count himself among the fools in this world. He was not going to leave fingerprints. He used the sole of his shoe to grind the broken glass on the floor into glittering fine fragments. Then he carefully slipped the jagged neck of the bottle into his pocket and left the apartment.

As he walked through the rain back to his car he was surprised to hear himself whistling. His world had been set right again. Millicent was definitely dead now. At last, for sure and forever.

AFTER A DREAMLESS NIGHT, HERRIGAN AWOKE WITH AN explosive headache and a parched mouth. As he showered, towed dry, and prepared a breakfast consisting only of black coffee and a large glass of orange juice, he did not think about Millicent.

He didn't think about last night at all until he unfolded the morning newspaper, curious about whether Millicent's body had been discovered.

Herrigan's head throbbed with pain. As he gaped at the front page, puzzlement and then rage swept over him like an icy wave. This was

incredible!

The paper reported the murder of the woman on Rappaport, but it gave her name as Dorothy Johnson and mentioned that she had lived at the same address for eight years. That wasn't all. Dorothy Johnson's photograph was in the paper, the likeness of a full-faced blonde with dark eyes.

This wasn't Millicent! The police were trying to trick him again! It hadn't worked six months ago and it wouldn't now. There was no way they could prove he had severed the brake line on Millicent's car, that they had argued and she intended to leave him. And indeed she had left him, but in the manner of his choosing.

Since then Herrigan had been indulging in drugs and drank heavily and frequently, depending on these artificial means to ease his way past what he considered to be a natural temporary sensation of guilt. After all, he'd gotten clean away with murder. Probably every successful murderer felt this way. Guilt was a subterranean creature that gnawed at the roots of the mind. But this guilt would die of malnutrition someday soon, because if he had it to do over Herrigan would gladly kill Millicent again. He *had* killed her again.

He crumpled the front page of the newspaper into a ball and buried it deep in the wastebasket beneath yesterday's garbage. He didn't know what the police expected to accomplish with their lies and didn't particularly care. He was safe. There was no reason for him to concern himself with their feeble attempts at trickery. They couldn't reach him.

He downed his chilled orange juice in a long series of noisy gulps and then sipped at his coffee. It was Saturday. Herrigan had nothing to do all day and felt like doing nothing. His headache was disappearing. Soon he would feel better than he'd ever felt.

WEDNESDAY EVENING HE SAW MILLICENT AGAIN. SHE was standing looking in a shop window, carrying a large brown paper sack. Herrigan recognized her at once. By the characteristic way she rotated her heel as she began to walk, as if she were grinding some despised object into the ground. By the set of her shoulders, the tilt of her head, her smile.

Rage and terror pounding in his chest, he followed her, walking slightly faster than she was, drawing nearer as they crossed the shadowed parking lot.

In the pale wash of brightness from one of the buzzing overhead lights, she turned suddenly and saw him.

Recognition flared in her eyes, and the corners of her lipsticked mouth twisted up in an amused grin. "I believe we know each other,"

Millicent said. She stood waiting for him

Herrigan's hands were at her throat, his thumbs probing soft vulnerability. He felt the tremor of her gasp merge with the pulsing roar of his blood, with the undersanding that fell upon him too late.

This woman wasn't, and yet was, Millicent. Rather, a part of her had somehow been taken over by Millicent. This was why some people behaved in such a way that they would inevitably become victims, why so many seemingly inexplicable slayings profaned the news. *This was how the murdered dead sought vengeance!*

A Security patrol found him half an hour later, his fingers still clenched about her neck, his body rigid and straining, locked in the embrace of a dead stranger.

MYSTERY MINQUIZ

What five actors have portrayed James Bond in films?

Sean Connery, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, David Niven, and Barry Nelson. (Barry Nelson was 007 in a 1954 CBS television presentation, with Peter Lorre as the villain!)

Name three cities where Mike Shayne has worked as a private detective.

New York, New Orleans, Miami.

On the British TV mystery/adventure series *The Avengers*, what three actresses played the female leads.

Honor Blackman, Diana Rigg, and Linda Thorson.

What actors portrayed Mike Shayne in films? On television? On radio?

In films: Lloyd Nolan and Hugh Beaumont; on television: Richard Denning; on radio: Jeff Chandler.

Was it an accident, or was the fire deliberately set? Skittles didn't know, but Strawbrains had some very definite ideas on the subject!

Arson by Air

by WADE MOSBY

HARDIGAN J. SKITTLES WAS ABRASIVE, SARCASTIC AND impatient. He also was smart. Crafty, sly, street-smart—all of those. That's how he got to be chief inspector.

The handiest target for his scorn was his assistant, Detective John Richey. Richey grew up on a farm, and even though he had been tops in his class at the police academy and had served a rugged apprenticeship on the tactical squad, Skittles called him Strawbrain.

A lesser man would have told Skittles to take the job and shove it, but Richey was about as sensitive to caustic comment as a slab of concrete. Skittles in a good mood was nothing to rave about, and now the Estes arson investigation had made him particularly acrimonious. Eleazar Estes, director of the Museum of Anthropological History, had been a man about town, bright, witty, in demand as a guest and noted for the parties he gave at his thirteenth floor penthouse. His rooftop commanded an excellent view of the harbor.

The penthouse, with Estes in it, had burned to a shell one night after a dinner party. Fire department investigators blamed a short circuit. The mayor wasn't satisfied with that theory. He told the police chief to put his best investigator on the case. And that's why Inspector Skittles, with Detective Strawbrain tagging along, was kicking ashes thirteen stories up.

THE IRASCIBLE SIDE OF SKITTLES RESENTED DOING WHAT he considered to be fire department work. The by-the-book side forced him to give it his best effort.

"That's strange," Richey said.

"You're strange," Skittles snapped.

"I mean, those potted palms, or whatever they were, on the patio."

"What about 'em?"

"There's one more pot than palm."

"So what? Maybe Estes kept a spare pot. Maybe one of his trees died. Maybe you think this was a farm."

"You can't grow a plant in a pot of air," Richey continued. "There should be dirt in all of 'em. This one's clean as a whistle, if you don't count the scorch marks."

"Lemme see that pot," Skittles ordered.

He fingered it, sniffed at it, and thought for a long time.

"I might have something here," he said finally. "Smells like gasoline."

"Maybe Estes used it to ignite a charcoal grill. It's not safe, but it works."

"And maybe he was out here roasting weenies," Skittles snorted. "The party was catered. The caterer's people left with all their equipment before 10 p.m. And they used bottled gas in their stoves."

"You think there was gasoline in that pot?" Richey asked. Skittles ignored him.

"The question is," intoned Skittles, "how was the gasoline ignited—and long after Estes had locked up and gone to bed?"

"Maybe Estes threw a cigarette out the window?"

"Windows were sealed. Place was air conditioned. And who asked you? It just doesn't make sense."

"If an ordinary mortal wanted Estes dead," Richey said, "he'd hit upon a plan that fit within his ordinary experience."

"You can't kill a man with 'ordinary experience,' Strawbrain. Did you learn that at the academy? Get out of here and check Estes' background and habits with the people at the museum."

"Now, take your average guy," Richey continued. "He wants to kill somebody, he finds a gun, first thing."

"Gun! You know there were no signs of slugs around here, and none in what was left of Estes. And no shots were heard. What do you say to that?"

Richey gazed at the walls of the adjacent building, some thirty-five feet away.

"Could have come from right over there—one of those windows."

"If you don't get out of here," gritted Skittles, "I will bust your butt so far you'll have to stand on a cow to look over a straw bale."

Richey left quickly.

Skittles stared at the building that had drawn Richey's interest, shook his head and slowly started back to his office.

RICHEY SPENT THE REST OF THE MORNING AT THE MUSEUM, and then went to the main office of K & K Catering. He was back in Skittles' office at 3:30 p.m.

"Now what?" sighed Skittles.

"Thought I'd give you a report," Richey said. "I checked out Estes' salary. It was a nice one but not exactly what you'd call a penthouse income. Estes lived pretty high on the hog."

"Can't you ever forget about hogs? Get on with it."

"This suggests that Estes had another source of income."

"So you found that his nice old aunt died and left him a farm."

"He had to have some sideline that he was uniquely qualified for, something that brought in an extra income."

"You think Estes was moonlighting?"

"I think he was smuggling."

"Smuggling!" Skittles growled. "What's to smuggle? Diamonds? Dope? Guns? Detective badges?"

"Artifacts. Museum pieces. Gold."

Skittles whistled in spite of himself.

"Got anything to back that up?"

"Not right now," Richey said, "but I think we will be able to find a pretty good witness."

"Where, for God's sake?"

"I don't know . . ."

"You don't know!" Skittles exploded. "You got me half believing some cockamamie smuggling story and you can't back it up?"

"I thought I should consult with you before proceeding," Richey said.

"Well, at least you got part of it right. What's to consult?"

"Here is a list of the caterer's hired help. Most of them are regulars. But the caterer had a couple of big parties that night, and picked up some extras to help out."

"So?"

"Here's another list—names of people arrested by the feds for understanding the value of imported art objects. Call it smuggling, if you like."

"What's that got to do with Estes?"

"I think it got him killed, chief, but I'll get to that. One of the busted smugglers is Salvador Picchu. Caught trying to bring in a fortune in Peruvian artifacts."

"What's the connection?"

"It may be a long shot, but one of the caterer's extras is named Sal Pico. Now Picchu had a motive—the feds' chief witness against him was Dr. Eleazar Estes."

"That came within his field of expertise, didn't it?"

"Certainly. But Picchu claimed that he had been stiffed on the deal, that he had no personal knowledge of the worth of the stuff he brought in."

"Did Picchu serve time?"

"A year in a federal pen. Got out eighteen months ago."

"Where is he now?"

"Disappeared. Broke parole. But if Picchu happens to be Sal Pico, he's holed up around town somewhere."

"I see," Skittles said, easing back in his chair. "And you think it was Pico who put gasoline in the potted palm—first removing the palm and making it disappear?"

"He certainly had a good opportunity."

"And then lit the fire and jumped off the roof with a parachute?"

"That isn't how it happened."

Skittles' face was getting red. He wasn't accustomed to having subordinates explain things to him.

"Well, why the hell don't you bring in this Pico? Maybe he knows something that you don't know, although I don't see how that's possible."

"Right, chief. I took the liberty of passing that message along to the uniformed division. In your name, of course."

"Of course," Skittles choked.

SAL PICO WAS FOUND WITHIN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. HIS fingerprints matched Salvador Picchu's. He said he had been hiding because he was afraid of deportation. And, yes, he remembered Estes, but hadn't known he would do kitchen work in his house.

Skittles was inclined to turn him back to the feds.

"Hold him for another day, chief," Richey said. "We've got a few loose ends. Uh, I'll need a search warrant."

He handed Skittles a note with the address and purpose.

"I'll hang onto Pico for a bit and I'll have that warrant in an hour. What is it you're looking for?"

"Well, it's a BB gun."

"A what?!"

"Trust me, chief. It'll fit when we have all the pieces."

Richey thought it best to leave at that moment. He went directly to the apartment building next to the burned out penthouse. The super there recognized a picture of Pico. He had been hired for part time janitor work at night. Richey asked for a tour. At a hall window that overlooked Estes' penthouse, Richey got on his hands and knees and felt around under a radiator. He pulled out some debris and pocketed it.

"Maybe Sal missed a few spots," the super apologized. "He has other jobs. Good man, though. Reliable."

Richey thanked the super, and went to the building where Pico had a room. Two plainclothesmen, with warrants, were waiting.

A BB gun was found in thirty minutes. Richey went back to headquarters and spent some time questioning Pico. Then he went to Skittles' office.

"We got it nailed down, chief," he said. "Pico has confessed."

"Confessed what?"

"Before the party, he carried the gasoline up to Estes' patio, inside a bottled gas grill. He emptied a potted palm behind the edge, filled the pot with gasoline and put it next to the penthouse wall—right next to the air conditioner intake, as it turned out."

"How did you get him to confess? And how . . ."

"The BB gun did it. It was in his apartment. Pico said he used it to keep pigeons off the building next to Estes'."

"You can't start a fire with a BB gun," the chief roared. "Kindly tell me what the hell happened?"

"I was getting to that, chief. After he planted the gasoline, he got rid of the smock the caterer had given him, and reported for work at his janitor job next door. About 3 a.m. when the wind had died down, he went to a window overlooking the penthouse. He dropped a kitchen match down the barrel of the BB gun, aimed and 'pfft!' The match sailed, headfirst, hit the wall at Estes' place, ignited and dropped."

"Into the gasoline?"

"He used up a half a box of matches before he got one to land in the pot, but it only took that one."

"He was sore because Estes testified as to the value of the artifacts?"

"Not only that, chief. Pico says he had been working for Estes, smuggling Incan artifacts of incredible value from Peru. Estes promised him the sky and got him a cell in the pen."

Skittles stared at his assistant.

"What put you onto this?"

"You did, chief, when you sent me to the museum. In addition to the paper work, I looked around at various things, including blowpipes—some people call them blowguns. Indians could shoot a thing the size of a darning needle 135 feet or so with great accuracy.

"And then it occurred to me that a BB gun, loaded with a kitchen match, could do what we figured was impossible. Everything led to Pico."

"Who knows all this?"

"You and I, chief. And the stenographer who took down the confession. I told him to keep mum about it and bring the transcript directly to you. I thought perhaps you'd like to announce it."

"One more thing, Richey. How did you know about BB guns and kitchen matches?"

"Aw, hell, chief. All us Strawbrains know that."

The chief cleared his throat.

"Good job, Straw . . . er, Richey," he said. "I will tell the chief that you were of great assistance to me. Now get out of here. I've got work to do."

THE AVENGERS

Remember THE AVENGERS, the British-import adventure series on television in the sixties, starring Patrick MacNee as John Steed, Diana Rigg as Mrs. Emma Peel, and Linda Thorson as Tara King? Sure you do. Well, fans, here's good news. A 16-page tabloid-sized newspaper, WITH UMBRELLA, CHARM AND BOWLER, is being published quarterly, with articles, interviews and photographs covering this popular TV series and its reincarnation as THE NEW AVENGERS. You can get a four-issue subscription by sending five dollars to CARUBA ENTERPRISES, PO BOX 40, Maplewood, New Jersey 07040.

Something awful would happen that summer. It was in the air and on the wind, a tangible thing, sensed and ominous, frightening and sinister, as wild and turbulent and savage as love and hate and revenge.

The Ostrichman

by JAMES GRAY

I WAS A ROUSTABOUT IN THOSE DAYS, THRILLED WITH the garish world of the Lauther Circus, content with sweeping sawdust and scrubbing cages and feeding growling beasts. After the dead life of a dead village, it was a whole new world of glitter and tinsel, of clowns and giggling children and roaring tigers, where each stop brought out new crowds and opened new vistas. The circus was more than my escape, it was my education. I learned on the job what bored me in books, how people think and what they dream, how they feel and what they want. I learned of love and hate and murder.

And that brings me to the grim tale of the Ostrichman.

In the Lauther Circus, Otto Drago was the top banana. Normally, the lion tamer, or the high-wire act, or the trapeze artist commands center ring, but Otto never took second billing to anyone. He was the

last of the big-time geeks and he played his role to the hilt. He was tall, and wide in the chest, with striking cheekbones and slate-gray eyes at once piercing and wary, his features and manner faintly aristocratic. He wore black leather riding boots that rose above the knees, and gaudy blue and green and red satin shirts that shimmered in the sun and flared at the neck, revealing thick cords of muscle. And he fancied skin-tight stretch pants, an odd affectation in a man which kindled much furtive whispering, Otto having never married. What happened proved the whispers wrong.

It wasn't easy for a geek to become box-office, but Otto pulled it off with daring and panache. He knew what the gawking masses wanted and gave it to them in spades. He started as the wild man in a pit, draped in wolfskins and a filthy fake beard, staked out to seize a live chicken and chomp off its head. It had to be done quick and clean, and he had to hold the severed neck in his mouth until the spurting blood dribbled from his lips, and then he snarled and gibbered and frothed and glared crazy as men paled and women fainted. He was good, and by the next night the take had doubled. But there were plenty of losers willing to chew off a chicken's head for money or a bottle, winos and half-wits and derelicts, and to get ahead, Otto needed a gimmick. He found one. It was an inspiration, and it vaulted him to the top of his profession. His stomach couldn't tolerate blood, and he vomited after each show, and that gave him the idea. He tested himself, and found he had no difficulty regurgitating at will. All he had to do, any time and any place, was curl his tongue back down his throat, and he would feel a sudden nausea and his stomach would empty violently. It was a gift. His tongue was long and slender and unusually flexible, and he could easily retract it far enough to ignite the desired effect. Realizing his unique talent, he devised a method of putting it to use that was sheer genius.

THE MOMENT ENDURES IN SIDE-SHOW LEGEND. IT WAS A cool June night in Peoria, and Otto mounted the makeshift stage without the beard and wolfskin accouterments. He sensed he had stumbled onto a class act. The pitchman introduced him as Otto the Ostrichman and he took his bow, and as the calliope blared "When You and I Were Young Maggie" he went into his act and won instant immortality. He produced a small, wooden box, pocked with holes attesting that it caged a living thing. With a melodramatic flourish, he unlatched the lid and hauled out a squirming rat. A gasp of horror rippled the crowd. With tantalizing deliberateness, Otto tilted back his head and opened his mouth, milking every last drop of tension, and

then lifted the rat and swallowed it. That first night he had no certainty how the rodent would react. He had done what he could to prepare, petting it and feeding it by hand and letting it sleep with him in his bed. He fondled it incessantly, and reached a point where he could slide it into his mouth and hold it for seconds. It bit him the first time he tried that, and he had to have a tetanus shot, but gradually it grew used to his mouth, and slipped in eagerly and curled up as if in a nest. But there was no way to test its response inside a live stomach.

So Otto swallowed and held his breath. The onlookers gaped and shrieked in disbelief and surged near the stage, panting in horrible anticipation like starved dogs. Cleverly, Otto had worn a flared shirt so the writhing lump sliding slowly down his throat was plainly visible. He was a large man, and had tested his esophagus with swords and a rope, and knew it had the capacity, and within an instant it was done. He waited, peering out at the sea of shocked faces, and then twisted his tongue back onto itself and down his throat, and convulsed and in a flash a whiskered snout and beady eyes popped from his lips. He clasped the now slithery rat in his right hand and waved it in the air, and the tiny pink feet kicked fitfully as the mob exploded like a bursting grenade. Men cheered and tossed their hats at the sky, and boys jumped on stage and shook his hand, and women swooned, and the calliope belched into a rousing rendition of "The Marine Hymn."

From that day onward, life was a rocket ride to the stars for Otto the Ostrichman. He was the toast of three continents, the most sought-after act under the big top, hotter even than Wallenda. Within a year, he was the prize attraction at the Lauther Circus.

Otto was on top of the world, and yet fear and doubt gnawed at him. He worried when his luck would run out. His act, after all, was dependent on Brutus, his rat. The problem was that rats die young. A three-year-old specimen is ancient. Otto tried training other rats, but never recreated the intimacy he shared with Brutus. He fretted over what he would do when Brutus passed on. Ironically, it was a fate he would never face.

OLD HANS LAUTHER HAD BEEN A TOP AERIALIST IN HIS day, but was past sixty and infirm with arthritis, and needed a cane to hobble around. He had money and owned the circus and was the bearer of a famous if faded reputation, and yet Lauther was a bitter man. His wife was a tall and striking brunette, and she was also flagrantly and relentlessly unfaithful. Hans was too proud to play the diffident cuckold.

Ava Lauther's current paramour was the star of the center ring, Otto

Drago. As is often the case, an affair of the heart received a surreptitious boost from the needs of the pocketbook. No one could have guessed this fact at the time, for only Hans and Ava and his physician knew Hans suffered from bone cancer and had only weeks to live. As he had always been gaunt and hollow-eyed, friends failed to gauge the gravity of his condition. He went on chemotherapy, and gulped pain pills and grew so violently ill he needed compazine to keep food down. For Ava it was time to plan for her future. Without her husband's guiding hand and renown in the business, the survival of the circus was touch and go. All that had kept it afloat for the last year was the drawing power of Otto the Ostrichman. But with Hans gone, would Otto stay? Ava could take no chances. She had one bait she could use to entice him—her body—and it proved a snap for her to spark an affair. Otto had never had much time for or much success with women, and when Ava deluged him with subtle and overt advances, he quickly succumbed. Sharp-eyed roustabouts noticed that he purchased a gilded cage for Brutus and moved the rat out of his bed. Because of Hans, most preferred to turn their backs.

Hans found out anyway. He was sick and dying, but not blind. One fever-wracked night he awoke from fitful sleep and spied his wife sneaking away into the moonlight. He crawled out of bed and followed her to Otto's trailer and vowed revenge. Hans was old line circus and not one to let an upstart geek step into his shoes.

THE PARTY CAME AS A SURPRISE. HANS TOLD AVA IT WAS a sentimental gesture, a going-away shindig for his workers. He wanted them to know how he felt about them. So, before the night performance, the main tent was lit, and beans and salads and cold cuts and champagne laid out on long picnic tables, as the calliope serenaded with "Auld Lang Syne." Of course, Otto was there, suspecting nothing. His meeting with Ava had been furtive, and he trusted, unobserved. In some ways, Otto was not a bad sort, and he never relished hurting the old man. He lunched and downed three goblets of champagne and felt calm and a trifle drowsy. Drinking might not be a great idea before a performance, but everything went smoothly that night prior to Otto's act. Reynard the knife-thrower tossed his blades with precision, and The Great Mantini stared down the snarling big cats, but then Mantini always needed a preshow bracer.

By the time Otto paraded into the center ring, the tent was packed and tensed, with Hans and Ava perched solemnly in the front row. The crowd roared, for this was the moment they had awaited with bated breath. The calliope snorted into "Tales From the Vienna Woods" and

Otto glided into his act. As usual, there were gasps when he drew Brutus from the box and held him aloft. He was an old rat now, and fat, and there was a queer lassitude in his eyes, as if he were weary of his notoriety and of life upon the wicked stage. But Otto loved it. His eyes swept the throng, honing in on Ava, and his face split into a dazzling smile as feminine hearts fluttered. He stalked about the ring, plucking each quivering nerve in turn, until at last he was ready. The tent darkened, and a single spotlight glared down as Otto bent back his neck and gaped his mouth like a baby robin begging for worms. He lifted Brutus by the tail to arm's length, holding the pose to ratchet up the tension, and then slowly lowered the rat until it vanished into his mouth. Flexing his neck straight, Otto smiled as the crowd erupted. It was more than cheering, it was adulation, a thousand voices bellowing one huge thunderclap of approval. Otto strutted in triumph, a sequined god acknowledging the homage of mortals.

Satisfied at last, he prepared to vomit.

He postured straddle-legged, hands on hips, and twisted his tongue back down his throat. Nothing happened. He tried again frantically, and then again and again. There was no hint of retching. His eyes widened in horror and fear stabbed his spine and he was suddenly and ghastly aware of a wriggling agony below his ribs. Ava sensed his panic and screamed. Her shriek was a match dropped into dry tinder, and within seconds, the crowd flamed into a shocked yowl. Down in the center ring, Otto gagged in frenzied terror, and clawed at his body, his eyes bugging out of his skull, his flesh livid, blood foaming from his lips. Mercifully, he pitched face down into the sawdust, as his limbs twitched and his torso shuddered, and then he lay still. They turned the spotlight away, and the show was over.

It was murder of the classic type, clear and simple. A jealous husband revenged himself on his wife's lover. Hans had spiked the party champagne with compazine, a potent drug that suppresses the vomiting reflex. The wine masked the taste. With the amount that was in his system, there was no way Otto could throw up Brutus this night.

There wasn't much to do or say. Hans, beyond legal retribution, died within a couple of weeks. Without him or Otto, the show folded and Ava filed for bankruptcy.

As for Brutus, he had panicked when his master failed him and chewed wildly in all directions, finally gnawing his way out. The exertion proved too much for the old rat and he bellied-up that night. They buried him in the same coffin as Otto.

SHERLOCK HOLMES QUIZ

Choose the word that will correctly complete these Sherlock Holmes titles!

1. THE _____ BUILDER
a) MUSGRAVE b) MASTER c) NORTHWEST d) NORWOOD
2. THE _____ BACHELOR
a) BLOODY b) DISCREET c) JOYFUL d) NOBLE
3. THE _____ TREATY
a) SUBMARINE b) BROKEN c) FOREIGN d) NAVAL
4. THE _____ THREE-QUARTER
a) VICTORIOUS b) MISSING c) DEADLY d) STUDENTS'
5. THE _____ STONE
a) ROSETTA b) PROBLEM c) MAZARIN d) GALL
6. THE _____ MANE
a) HORSE'S b) LION'S c) SILVER d) BOUNDING
7. THE _____ CLIENT
a) ROYAL b) ILL-FED c) KING'S d) ILLUSTRIOUS
8. THE _____ INTERPRETER
a) FRENCH b) SPANISH c) GREEK d) POLISH
9. THE _____ PINCE-NEZ
a) SILVER b) GOLDEN c) BRASS d) PURLOINED
10. THE _____ THUMB
a) GREEN b) GARDENER'S c) TINY d) ENGINEER'S

ANSWERS

- | | | | |
|------------|-----------|----------------|----------------|
| 1. NORWOOD | 2. NOBLE | 3. NAVAL | 4. MISSING |
| 5. MAZARIN | 6. LION'S | 7. ILLUSTRIOUS | 10. ENGINEER'S |
| 8. GREEK | 9. GOLDEN | | |

*There was no harm in taking a chance — unless it was
a chance on murder!*

Lottery

by Edward D. Hoch

FRIDAYS WERE ALWAYS BUSY FOR AMY TROTTER. MOST employees of the offices in the Ampersand Building were paid on Fridays and a good number of them stood patiently in line during their coffee breaks or lunch hours to buy the little yellow, blue and orange lottery tickets that she dispensed from the on-line computer terminal at her elbow. It got so busy on Fridays that her boss, Sam Buttalo, worked behind the counter himself, tending to the magazine and cigarette customers so Amy could devote full time to the lottery tickets.

After a few months of it she'd gotten so she could separate the daily customers from the Friday ones, if only in her mind. There was little Max August, for instance, who left his tiny watch repair shop by the elevators every morning promptly at 11:45 and strolled over to buy a number for the day. Often he stuck with the same number for a week or longer if he thought it was lucky, but to Amy's knowledge he'd never won anything yet.

"Good morning, Max," she said, smiling at his arrival right on schedule. "The usual today?"

He laid down a dollar bill. "Sure, give me 457 again. Maybe the fourth time will be lucky."

She punched the numbers into the computer terminal and waited while the lottery tickets rose magically from the maw of the adjoining printer. "Here you are, Max."

He started to chat about the lovely spring weather, but then saw a customer entering his shop and hurried off to tend him. "That Max does a great little business," Sam commented, reaching across her to get some change from her cash register.

"It's just a good location," Amy decided, grateful for the momentary lull before the noonday lines began to form. "Anything would go good there."

And she was right, of course. The Ampersand Building was in the heart of New York, on Lexington Avenue just across the street from Grand Central Station. In addition to traffic from people who worked in the building, its lobby served as a natural short-cut for thousands each day on their way to or from the station. It was especially noticeable in bad weather, but even on sunny days the lobby was a busy place.

Another customer came out of the elevator and she saw that it was Greg Powell, a junior vice-president of Ampersand International. "Hi, Amy — how's tricks today?"

"Fine, Greg. What's the number?"

"Give me five tickets on 032. It's my wife's birthday and that's her age. Don't tell her I told you, though."

"Your secret is safe." Since Amy had never laid eyes on Mrs. Powell, it was a safe enough promise to make. Greg and his wife lived up in Larchmont, and Amy often wondered what it would be like to have a successful husband and a home in the suburbs, instead of a tiny apartment in the East Sixties.

The line formed right on schedule, about two minutes to twelve, and she was kept busy for the next hour or so, punching out the tickets as fast as her fingers could move. She hoped New York State appreciated all the money she was taking in for them. There were instant lottery tickets too, with numbers to be scratched off, but most customers at Sam's magazine and tobacco stand seemed to like picking their own numbers in the daily drawing.

SOMEWHERE AROUND TWELVE-THIRTY SHE NOTICED A

handsome dark-haired man in a turtle-neck sweater and corduroy jacket come up to the counter and speak to Sam Buttalo. "I can't talk now," Sam told him, a bit curtly. "Can't you see we're busy?" The young man stood aside but didn't leave.

When the lunch-hour crowd slacked off after one, Amy noticed that the man was back with Sam, talking earnestly. Finally she saw her boss sigh and head in her direction. "Amy, this is Sergeant Vince DeJulio from the police. He wants to ask you a few questions."

"Police? What about?"

"You needn't worry, Miss," DeJulio assured her. "Maybe I can buy you some coffee while we talk."

"Go ahead," Sam said with a wave of his hand. "I'll take over the machine."

They found a booth in the little coffee shop next to Max's watch repair shop and Sergeant DeJulio ordered two coffees. The lunchtime crowd was beginning to thin out, though most booths and counter stools were still occupied.

"I'm with Homicide," DeJulio said, startling her with his abrupt plunge into business. "We're investigating the murder of an unidentified man whose body was found last night. He had these lottery tickets in his pocket. They were purchased from your machine."

He passed her a small glassine envelope containing three of the daily lottery tickets. All bore the number of her on-line terminal at the bottom, and all showed different wagered numbers: 123, 555, 789. "Yes," she confirmed. "I sold these on Monday of this week." She was telling him nothing. The date was printed just before the selected number.

"Do you remember to whom?"

"Monday's not as busy as some days, but it's still hard to remember. We get so many people."

"Maybe a picture would help."

She stared at the glossy photograph he produced next, then quickly turned away. "My God —"

"I'm sorry. He'd been dead about 72 hours when we found him, but we think the face was pretty well preserved. Do you know him?"

"I — I think so. He bought a few tickets every week or ten days, but I don't believe he worked in the building. I almost had the impression he came here to make deliveries of some sort, though he was well dressed for a delivery man."

DeJulio's eyes hardened. "Why do you say deliveries?"

"Sometimes I'd see him come through the lobby with a package, but he never had it on the way out. That's when he stopped for his lottery tickets."

"Where did he go?"

"I've no idea. He went up on the elevator."

"And you don't know his name?"

"I'm trying to remember if Sam — Sam Buttalo, my boss — might have called him by name once. But I guess not."

"I showed him the picture. He didn't know him."

"How was he killed?" Amy asked, wondering why she needed to know.

"Stabbed in the chest with some sort of thin blade. Then the killer went through his pockets. We don't know what was taken. He apparently looked at the lottery tickets but left them."

"Naturally. These weren't winners. That tells you the man was killed after eight o'clock Monday night, because that's about the time the winning number is known."

"You'd make a great detective," he said with admiration. "That's a good bit of deduction."

She finished her coffee. "I have to get back to work now. This isn't my lunch hour."

"Thanks for your help." He paid for the coffee and walked her across the lobby. "One other thing — we think the victim was a cocaine dealer. There were traces in his pockets, and it might explain those mysterious packages. Seen any evidence of drugs around the building?"

"No, but I guess I wouldn't know what to look for. I smoked pot once in my life and got sick."

Sam was unpacking magazines behind the counter and checking them off the list. "He ask you lots of questions? Did he show you the picture?"

"Yeah, he showed me the picture," Amy said. "It ruined my appetite for lunch."

"It's in the afternoon paper. They found him right down there under Grand Central, in one of those tunnels where the bums sleep. They figure he was robbed."

"Funny I never asked where they found him," Amy said. She watched for a moment while Sam sorted the magazines, and then went to wait on a customer.

"Why tell me all this?" she asked.

"You've got a detective's mind. I thought it might give you ideas." He glanced over to where Sam was working the cash register. "Did your boss ever go to that men's room after Lictor arrived with his package? His stopping here for lottery tickets could have been a signal he'd made a delivery."

Amy felt her growing anger. "All of us down here use those mezzanine rest rooms — even the cook in the coffee shop! You think we give out cocaine with the newspapers?"

BY THE FOLLOWING MONDAY THE DEAD MAN HAD BEEN identified through his fingerprints. He was a known drug dealer named Conrad Lictor, whose clients were said to include business and professional people in the midtown Manhattan area. The story that had started out as a small item about a knifing and robbery had become front-page news.

"He bought his lottery tickets here," she told Greg Powell when he came down shortly before noon. "I remembered his face."

"Small world," he agreed. "Give me two on number 601, will you?"

"How was your wife's birthday?"

"What? Oh, it was fine. Just fine."

Max August, the watch repairman, was still playing number 457. "One more time," he told her. "Then I'll have to find a new lucky number."

"It's not lucky if you never win."

"For me it's lucky."

Numbers, all the time numbers. Some nights she could see them in her sleep. "What's the trouble?" Sam asked. "You look tired. Have a fight with your boy friend?"

"You know better than that. I spent the weekend writing a paper for my course at N.Y.U."

"All the time courses! You'll be too good for this job soon. I'll have to sell the tickets myself." Sam never played the lottery and took a dim view of the profitable sideline. "Oh, oh! That cop is back again."

Amy was pleased to see Vince DeJulio, but he didn't take her for coffee this time. "We've been busy over the weekend," he told her. "We located the drop for Lictor's cocaine. He had a key to the men's room on the mezzanine here. I had a hunch it unlocked a door in this building and we started trying them. Luckily we started at the bottom rather than the top. He either met someone there or hid his packages in the toilet tank for later recovery."

"No, no —"

She turned to wait on a customer and when she looked back he was gone. She thought about what he'd said all through the noon hour, until finally on her lunch break she wandered over to Grand Central Station. DeJulio thought she knew something, or could remember something useful. Well, maybe she could.

Amy knew where she was going, but when she found the place she had no idea what to do next. She stood there a few minutes, then headed back toward her building. That was when she saw him, walking fast, heading directly for the bank of lockers that had been her destination as well. When he turned the key and opened the door she spoke. "Hello, Max."

Max August turned, his face flushed with guilt. "Amy! What are you doing here?"

"You said this was the last day of your lucky number, the last day of 457, so I figured you'd come to remove the money from locker 457. You killed him for it, didn't you? Last Monday night, after he'd made his cocaine deliveries. You met him down here and stabbed him in the tunnel and stole the money. You were afraid to leave the station with it in case the police were watching and stopped you, so you hid it in a baggage locker and 457 became your lucky number starting the next morning. I suppose you were afraid to come back for the money till now."

"I came back every day," he corrected her, "to put fresh coins in the slot so the locker wouldn't be emptied. I left it here because I didn't know what else to do with it. So much money, Amy — nearly a hundred thousand dollars! Tell me how you found out."

"The killer checked the numbers on Lictor's lottery tickets, so it had to be someone who played the lottery, who knew last Monday's winning number. Most likely it was one of his own customers, who knew he'd have lots of cash on him. Lictor used the mezzanine men's room for his drops. Sam goes there, but he never plays the lottery. You go there too, and you do a big business at your repair shop — maybe because you sell cocaine on the side."

He tried to run then, but not from her. He'd spotted Vince DeJulio and two uniformed cops moving in on him. When the cops had him, she turned on DeJulio. "You followed me!"

"I had a hunch you'd solve it," he admitted with a grin. "I just wanted to be on the scene when you did."

The dying victim had pulled a mystery novel from the bookcase. Was it a clue or an accident? You be the judge!

Rocky and the Phantom Lady

by DICK STODGHILL

GLORIA SWAYS TO THE MUSIC, EYES CLOSED, LIPS PARTED a little, fingers tapping out the beat on the tabletop. She drifts into the same trance-like state each time the song plays on the jukebox. She has claimed it as her own because the name of the song, like hers, is Gloria.

The back door of Horner's opens, then closes with a bang. Gloria jerks back to reality, turning to frown at the person responsible. It is Rocky Myers, a Midland detective and a regular on her annual list of the city's ten most detestable men. Rocky is fat, pompous, bald, and he smokes cigars. And if that were not enough to insure a place on Gloria's list, lechery gleams in his eyes whenever they fall upon her.

He sags down beside her in a chair that creaks under the strain, caresses her arm with dirty-nailed fingers, exhales the smoke from a fat corona in her face. Leaning closer, he croons, "Hi-yuh, sweet stuff."

She draws away from him, gramacing, and he laughs in the mistaken belief she is just pretending. Then, as an afterthought, he looks across the table at me and says, "Hi-yuh, Blinn."

I nod in his direction, then look at Gloria. She has started to gather her things together, preparing to make a break for the door. I wink at

her and smile. Then, as she pushes her chair back, she hesitates. Rocky has picked up the paperback in front of me and is studying the cover, scowling. His eyes rise slowly, settling on my face. "How come you happen to be reading this?"

"Why not?"

"This particular book, how come you happen to be reading it?"

"Why not?" I repeat, not comprehending his suspicious interest, but not really caring either.

The impasse irritates Gloria. She turns to Rocky, saying, "Hal's reading it because I loaned it to him. What difference does it make?"

He settles back in his chair again, the scowl fading. "Just curious, little girl."

The pet names, which she considers derogatory, are just one more thing Gloria dislikes about him. She swings her chair around so she is father away but facing him, black curls bouncing as she does so and a steely look in her eyes. "What do you know about that book?" she asks him.

"Nothing," he replies. "I remember it, that's all. And those mysteries, they're all alike—farfetched."

Keep it up, Rocky, I think to myself. Gloria loves mysteries.

"You've read *Phantom Lady*?" she asks disbelievingly.

"No, I never read that kinda stuff. Nothing like that ever happens in real life."

Gloria laughs deprecatingly. "You're a detective and you've never run across a mystery? Then what purpose do you serve? Why are the taxpayers paying you a salary?"

"Now back off," Rocky says, raising his hand. "I never said there wasn't crime. I meant it doesn't happen you have a guy murdered in a room with all the doors and windows locked from the inside. You know what I mean, where the guy leaves a clue, then some wiseacre comes along and figures it out. Stuff like that, it never happens."

I agree with him up to a point and almost sympathize because Gloria is aroused and will hang on like a bulldog. "So where does this particular book fit in?" I ask him.

He looks around, hoping he has found an ally. "It reminded me of something. Come to think of it, it proves my point."

Gloria leans closer to him, jaw set and fingers clenched. "I'll just bet it does. *Phantom Lady* happens to be a classic suspense story so naturally it proves there's no such thing as a real mystery. That makes a lot of sense."

"Tell us about it, Rock," I say, and Gloria mimics me, "Yes, by all

means tell us about it, Rock."

HE SHIFTS HIS BULK UNCOMFORTABLY. "WELL, IT WAS right after I made detective years ago. There was this case where I had the crazy idea maybe a guy had left a clue." He nods toward the book on the table. "And that was it."

"*Phantom Lady?*" Gloria and I said in unison.

"Yeah, *Phantom Lady*. See there was a burglar and this guy comes home and catches him in the act and gets a knife between the ribs. This was in the bedroom, and the guy wanders out to the living room and dies. As he's going down he takes the book with him and me, being a dumb rookie, think maybe it's some kinda clue. You wouldn't believe the time I wasted checking it out."

Gloria's expression of outrage has been replaced by one of inquisitiveness. She leans even closer and asks, "What do you mean he took the book with him?"

"He staggered up against a bookcase and hung on for support. Then when he went down he took the book along."

"What exactly happened when the victim walked in on the intruder?" Gloria asks.

Rocky has begun to enjoy his new role. Before answering her he shakes a finger at me and says, "Now none of this is gonna show up in that 'Around Town with Hal Blinn' column, understood?"

"Come off it, Rocky," I tell him. "If it's good, I use it. You know that."

"Then forget it," he says, shaking his head.

I start to reply but Gloria says, "Oh be quiet, Hal." Then to Rocky, "Go ahead, he won't use it in his column."

"Now wait a minute—" I begin, then shrug and mumble something under my breath. Suddenly I am the bad guy.

"Okay," Rocky says, pleased with himself. He lapses into police jargon, or something approaching a parody of it. "The subject arrives home from a VFW meeting, which he left early after becoming ill, and catches the perpetrator in the act. This was in the bedroom, where the subject's wife is asleep, also being sick and doped up on drugs."

"How do you know this if she was asleep?" I ask.

Rocky gives me a pitying look. "Because that's where they fought and where the trail of blood began."

Makes sense, I think, but keep the thought to myself.

"Go on," Gloria urges, annoyed by the interruption.

"Well, that was about it. The subject goes out in the living room and dies and the perpetrator takes off. Probably some punk on his first job

and it scares hell out of him so it's his last job, too. All he had time to do was pull open a few drawers before the subject walked in on him."

"And the wife slept through it all?" I ask a little skeptically.

"Like I said, she was doped up."

"Funny the man didn't go to her for help after he was stabbed."

"And that was all?" asks Gloria, sounding deflated.

"Except for the time I wasted on that book idea," Rocky replies. He picks it up again, his scowl returning. "Hey, this isn't the right book. The one I'm talking about, it was written by a guy named William Irish. I won't forget that one in a hurry. I checked out every mick in town thinking it might mean something. But this book, it was written by somebody named Cornell Woolrich."

"You should have checked further," I tell him. "Look at the fine print, Rocky. William Irish was a pseudonym. This is a reprint under his real name. Maybe someone who went to Cornell was the killer."

"Very funny," he says.

"Did you mean it about checking everything out?" asks Gloria.

"You bet I meant it. First the Irish angle, then every Bill he knew. Then the ladies in his life, only there weren't any phantom ladies hiding in that guy's closet."

"You should have read the book," Gloria says. "Then you would have known the killer's identity."

Rocky stares at her a moment, then puts his head back and laughs. I don't laugh, but I stare. Finally Rocky says, "Okay, chicky, wha'd'ya mean?"

"It really *was* a clue. The man didn't walk in on a burglar; he arrived home earlier than expected and found his wife in bed with his best friend. There was a fight and the friend killed him. The wife took the sleeping pills, or whatever they were, as a coverup after he left."

Following a long silence Rocky says, "That's crazy. For one thing, the best friend was a guy I knew myself by the name of Ted Powell. The straightest arrow you ever saw and the Rock of Gibraltar after it happened. Why if it wasn't for him, Marie—that's the wife—likely woulda gone off the deep end. As a matter of fact, about a year after it happened the two of them . . ." As his voice fades, a thoughtful look comes over Rocky's face.

"They did what?" asks Gloria. "Got married?"

"How'd you know?" Rocky asks suspiciously. "Are you familiar with this case?"

"How could I be? I've only been covering the school beat for the *News-Banner* the past four years. Before that I never heard of

Midland." For a moment she sits smugly, then adds, "And I never heard of the people involved. I still don't know the victim's name."

Rocky sits quietly, mulling it over. He actually seems to take her wild guess seriously. Even I wonder about it, she seems so sure of herself. After a lengthy silence I say, "Gloria, where did you come up with that idea?"

She shakes her head. "I don't want to spoil the end of the story for you." Looking at Rocky again she says, "Are you going to follow up on it?"

"No way to. They're both dead, killed in a wreck somewhere out west a couple of years later."

"You really are taking this seriously, aren't you, Rocky?" I ask him.

He hesitates, then says, "Naw. Anybody coulda come up with a guess like that."

"It wasn't a guess," Gloria says. "If you had read the book you'd have known it's the story of" —she pauses, looking across the table at me again— "I won't spoil it for you, Hal, but it's the story of a man betrayed by his best friend."

Rocky gets up suddenly, murmuring, "I gotta go." He drops a dollar on the table, then heads for the back door.

GLORIA AND I SIT IN SILENCE FOR A MOMENT OR SO BEFORE our eyes meet. She smiles, both dimples showing, but I just go on staring at her. When she picks her things up again I say, "You were putting him on, right?"

She lays her purse and notebooks back on the table. "I don't know. At first a little, maybe, because he made me mad. But after what he said about them . . ."

She settles back in her chair, thinking. I signal for two more drinks, then pick up a quarter and walk to the jukebox.

This time she forgets to go into her trance when the first notes of Gloria fill the room. She goes on staring at the table for a while, then looks up suddenly. She is smiling again, this time pensively. "I was right, Hal. I'm sure I was, and so was Rocky."

"Come on, Gloria, things don't happen that way in real life." I pick up the book and study the picture of a woman standing under a light on a deserted subway platform. In the foreground the shadow of an approaching man is barely visible. I turn to the title page, then one more, and read a quote by someone named John Ingall—"I answer not and I return no more."

I wonder.

She had been so calm about it. There had been no stab of guilt, only the fear of being caught. He would never know until it was too late!

The Lake

by RUTH WISSMAN

STACY TOOK A DEEP BREATH AS JIM BROUGHT THE CAR to a stop alongside the road, and her smile was wistful as she said, "It's really beautiful here with the aspens golden and the pines so green. And the lake . . . Do you think we can eat lunch on the boat before rain begins to fall? It does look rather stormy, don't you think?"

"Not really. Those dark clouds will probably blow away after a while." *They do*, he told himself. *All storms come to an end eventually, like the one Stacy created last night when she learned about Kathleen—Kathleen and me. Now she's taking it all in stride. This drive up here in the mountains where we spent our honeymoon has brought back good memories—kind of a re-creation of what used to be. Yet, it can never be quite the same again. Not now. Not after Kathleen.*

"Oh, Jim, do you know what I really wish? I wish we could stay right here for the rest of our lives," she said and took a deep breath of the bracing, fragrant air.

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With a mirthless laugh he replied, "Well, it would be a pleasant place in which to starve to death, I suppose. There's no way here for me to make a living, and no lab where you could work." Then stepping from the car he added, "I think I'm hungry. Cool air does that to me." He reached for the picnic basket and closed the door.

"Somehow I'm not," she said as she joined him. "I really believe I could survive on nothing more than this scenery. Good for the soul, wouldn't you say? Heavenly." Casting a glance toward him and the basket she thought, *I hope he'll not become suspicious when I don't eat. The wind is blowing. The water will be rough. I can say I'm nauseated. Motion sickness, of course.*

As they walked on, she thought about how easy it had been for her in the lab this morning. No one was watching, and her fingers had not even trembled when she poured the fine white powder into an envelope she had slipped into her pocket. *I was so calm about it*, she recalled with surprise. There had been no stab of guilt, but there had been the fear of being caught. This she had to admit. Again she glanced toward the basket and thought, *Tasteless in food. He'll never know until it's too late.* It was now that she shivered.

While descending the path to the lake, Jim looked at her and thought, *This is where Stacy belongs. With her dark hair and blue eyes—the deep green she's wearing. She seems to blend into the scenery somehow—almost becoming a part of it. How different she is from Kathleen.*

"Jim," she said suddenly, "you do love me, don't you? I mean, what's happened—you and . . . Well, it's over, isn't it?"

"We agreed not to speak of that again, Stacy. Remember?"

"Oh, I know, but—Well, I just wanted to be sure. I want to know that I'm the one—the only one you love."

"You already know that. Look around. It's great here, isn't it? Late in the Fall is certainly the time to come up here. We should do this more often, and we will. Okay?"

"Yes. Oh, I would love to," she replied, but found herself thinking, *Only I can't forgive you. You've twisted a knife into my heart, and I can't recover. I think I've—died inside, but you could never understand that. There's nothing deep about you. You kind of float along on the surface of things—of life itself. Of love, too.* She trembled and pulled her heavy jacket closer to her thin, cold body.

THEY FOLLOWED THE WINDING PATH DOWN TO THE shore, and as they drew near the boathouse they saw fishermen coming

in, boats returning over water that rippled with increasing fervor, and where ducks splashed as they scurried out of the way—swimming with the wind.

While Stacy waited for Jim to rent a boat, she gazed at the turbulent water and recognized its similarity to her own emotions. Then from some dim corridor of her mind came almost forgotten words of Robert Frost: "The road is long, the pace is slow. The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

If I ever sleep again, she thought.

"It'll be that one," Jim was saying, and she turned to see him pointing toward a weathered wooden boat. "It wasn't easy to get. The fellow in there wants to close up and go home. I told him to go ahead. I paid for two hours, but we can have it as long as we want, I guess—unless the rain hits first, of course. Well, let's go."

A moment later Stacy was seated in the bow quietly watching Jim coax a reluctant motor to start. At last it reponded, and soon they were passing a stone jetty and beginning to skim across the darkening water. For a while they followed the left shore where she watched hostile clouds gathering and cresting the high, gray peaks.

"Season's over—for the summer people, isn't it," she said. "And there's no snow yet to entice the winter groups. We're so—alone."

"And that's what we've been needing, Stacy. You and I. That's all. We should have done this months ago—come back here and—just be alone together. Stacy, I want you to know something. I love you, and don't you ever forget it. No one can ever take your place."

She caught her breath, and into her cheeks rose a surge of heat, and feeling a little sick she thought, *Oh, my God! what have I done! Somehow I've got to get those sandwiches . . . Oh, God! I must have been mad! I've got to think! I must think of a way . . .*

Now they were sailing farther from shore and toward a channel where water ran between tree and brush-covered arms of land reaching out as though to touch each other, and she recalled how they used to follow this same route when they were here on their honeymoon and so much in love. The boathouse had drifted from view, and as they sailed toward the center of this part of the lake, he said, "Stacy, do you remember?"

"Yes," she told him and swallowed with effort.

"We used to call this our private property. All ours. Right?"

She nodded and thought, *That's the way we were—private. Private property, then suddenly there was Kathleen. Why? Why did she have to come along and ruin everything? If it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't be*

in all this trouble. Damn! With a shudder Stacy gazed at the basket so close to his legs and felt faint.

Jim was slackening their speed and saying, "I think I'd like to eat now. Okay? Hungry yet?"

"No—uh—you go ahead. I don't think I could swallow a bite. My stomach feels tight—queasy, I guess." And it did, she realized. It felt as though it had suddenly tied itself into a knot. With effort she swallowed as he switched off the motor and the boat began to drift and rock. Now he reached for the basket and she caught her breath. "Good," he said. "You've brought wine."

Oh, God! she thought. *I'll have to tell him and then he'll hate me and*—

"Stacy, are you all right? You're not sick, are you? You look kind of green."

"Do I?" *Why did I think I could go through with this—actually poison him! Murder him! If I tell him—then he'll hate me forever. It will really be the end for us. There would be no way we could ever be together again. Oh, my God!* she thought. *There's something else that I didn't think of until now. There'd be traces! That poison leaves—evidence!* "Jim!"

"What?" He was frowning into the basket, and now he said, "What in the hell is this? Look! Look in here. See what's down in the bottom."

Stacy thought her heart would stop, and then it began to race. *What could there be? What might he have found?* She had been so very careful. Cautiously she moved toward him, knowing that there were only two things left for her to do. One, was to throw the basket overboard, and somehow make it look accidental—but how? Or else—confess, and this, she knew, would be the most difficult thing she had ever done before, and he would despise her, and it would be the end. She turned cold and was afraid she would be sick. Her voice was weak when she asked, "What's—in here? I—don't see anything but sandwiches and cake."

WHAT FOLLOWED TOOK PLACE QUICKLY; HIS HAND striking out. Her feeling the boat tip violently, and now she was in the water—the cold water that closed around her. For a moment there was no sound but the splash as she struggled, and then her scream as she surfaced, grabbed the rim of the boat and cried out, "Help! I can't swim! Help me! You *know* I can't swim! Please, Jim! Please!"

He kicked her fingers away, and as she fought and struggled, again the lake swallowed her. The next time her head broke through the

surface, he reached out and pushed her under. He had started the motor and now the boat was skimming across the lake, and an eerie sensation came over him as he realized he would never again see those wide, blue eyes of terror—except in nightmares, perhaps.

Jim found that he could not resist the nagging temptation to look back once more over his shoulder. What he saw was a thrashing in the water that soon ended, and then there was nothing.

Reaching the far shore, he turned off the motor, sat very still and tried to calm his jumping nerves and hammering heart. Finally he took a long swallow of wine and then another. He looked at the sandwiches and shook his head. It seemed he was not hungry anymore. Seeing Stacy drown was well . . . And yet . . . Now he reached into the basket, brought out a sandwich, regarded it for a moment and then took a bite, and another, and still another as he told himself that there was one thing about her he was going to miss—something Kathleen could never match. Stacy was one hell of a good cook.

RICHARD DEMING

When writers talk about a Professional, what they mean is somebody like Richard Deming. Name it, and Dick could write it—mystery, romance, western, adventure, war. He made his deadlines and he didn't cheat, not the editor and not the reader. His stories made sense and his characters talked the way people talk. A lot of us learned from Dick Deming.

If he hadn't been a writer, Dick would have made a fine bartender. His martinis could frost your teeth, and he wasn't bashful about pouring them. He didn't drink a whole lot himself, but if you were Dick's guest, your glass was never empty.

He probably had more friends than a man should be allowed. It was damn near impossible not to like the guy. He knew how to laugh even when things were tough, and before you knew it, you'd be laughing with him.

A few years back Dick had his first bout with cancer. He won that time and we all celebrated. But last summer he had to fight it again. Dick lost that one. He was a pro. He was a friend. I miss him.

—Gary Brandner,
November 1983

Mike's Mail

OOPS!

In the November issue, in my story THE FOURTH FRIDAY, the only mention of the date the story took place, 1893, came out 1983. If you run a MIKE'S MAIL or any kind of editor's note in the near future, I would appreciate mention of the fact—hate to have people believe I think trolley cars still run in Chicago.

Dick Stodghill
900 West Cromer Ave.
Muncie, Indiana 47303

Sorry about that, Dick. To make it up to you, the next story you have set in 1983 we'll change to 1893. That should even it out!

TAYLOR FAN

Read Mike Taylor's story in the January issue of MSMM, enjoyed it so much that I read it again so maybe I could find a clue to what happened to Elizabeth, but that didn't help. Today I read GOBLIN FARM hoping for an answer but to no avail. I just want to say that Mike Taylor sure knows how to pack a story and I hope that his next story (if there is another) will explain everything and not keep us hanging like the last two stories did. Keep up the good work on MSMM and keep turning out those great stories.

By the way, I renewed my subscription for another two years because of your great stories (and thanks for taking out the stupid jokes).

Michael Klein
#6
5510 Corteen Pl
N. Hollywood, CA 91609

REPRINTS?

I would like to say I enjoy reading MSMM every month.

I was sorry to read of Jack Ritchie's death.

Would it be possible at least twice a year to print the best stories of different authors in one large volume like Brett Halliday, Edward D. Hoch and Jack Ritchie?

Mrs. Annette Davis
3127 Detroit Rd.
Niles, Michigan 49120

Another mystery author who died recently was Richard Deming, who has had stories in MSMM and whom I knew personally. We'll have a more complete obit in a future issue.

It would be possible to reprint stories, but it wouldn't be economically feasible for us to do it. There are book publishers who do this, however, so you might check the library and your bookstore for them.

THE ALL-AMERICAN SHAMUS

Since you know Mr. Halliday, would you find out if he is planning on writing any more novels?

Also, he is slowly changing Mike Shayne's image with his Black Lotus and Jade-type stories. One reason Mike Shayne has stayed so popular is because of his "All-American detective-shamus" image. Espionage, spy, gangster types are a dime a dozen. That's why we pay more for MSMM than other books. Why we search the book stores, rummage sales, etc. for his novels. Don't destroy Mike Shayne. He's a good friend of mine.

If you know of anyone that has some back issues of MSMM, say sixties on back, that would like to sell them, let me know. I cleaned Tom Johnson out of all of his. Bless him. I don't want them to collect. I have other MS fans I pass them on to. Thanks.

Chris Tilghman
5609 Joneswood Dr.
Pine Bluff, Arkansas 71602

We don't have many back issues here. Can anybody out there help Chris out?

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS

by JOHN BALL

One of the most important mystery publishing projects of the decade is the complete set of the crime novels of Dame Agatha Christie being offered in elegant hard cover editions by Bantam. This is a book club program that will include eighty volumes over a seven-year period. The set is offered in two editions, a regular one at \$9.95 per volume and a deluxe leather bound set at \$24.95 each.

Several things recommend this program. Dame Agatha enjoyed the position of being the best selling author since Shakespeare, so her reputation will be secure for decades to come. It is a pleasure to report that the volumes are very well made; even the lower priced edition has marbled end papers and is printed on excellent stock. There is a close similarity in appearance between the two versions, both of which are in gold stamped dark blue. The usual snob appeal of the higher priced edition is discarded in favor of fine quality: imagine a mystery handsomely bound in leather with gold edges all around. Subscription sales are already substantial. Bantam is very definitely offering a better mousetrap and the legions of Agatha Christie admirers will certainly beat a path to its door.

☆ ☆ ☆

The private eye writings of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are now virtually revered, and the works of the late Ross MacDonald are approaching that status. Not yet as well known, Arthur Lyons also writes exceptionally well about private eye Jacob Asch. Lyons never strains for the too deft simile, but he has a vivid eye for the world around him and a considerable skill in putting it into words. The latest Asch novel is *At the Hands of Another*. When a man's car runs off a near deserted mountain road and he is killed, the insurance company calls it suicide with some strong supporting evidence. The

man's widow engages Asch to take another look on her behalf, since suicide would void a \$200,000 policy. How Asch goes about it makes very good reading. The story line is sure and the smooth, lucid writing reveals the hand of a true professional. You'll like this one. (Holt Reinhart and Winston, \$13.50)



If you enjoyed your visit to the Castle Dracula, Basil Cooper will take you to Castle Homolky in Hungary in his new book *The House of the Wolf*. Only there are no vampires this time. A group of folklorists gather at the castle for a mini-congress. Their deliberations are interrupted by a series of wild and weird events in which huge wolves are concerned. Legends and superstitions about the werewolf arise, all in the midst of a graphically described bitter winter. At a time when many publishers are putting out books of less than good quality, Arkham House continues to offer superior volumes well-bound with end papers and high-quality dust jackets. Also the chapter head decorations in the present volume are outstanding. Arkham House is building a considerable reputation for itself. (Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin, \$14.95)



In Michael Kenyon's new offering, *A Free Range Wife*, we again encounter Inspector Henry Peckover, the only Scotland Yard detective who seems to be afflicted with St. Vitus' dance. Mr. Kenyon is quite witty at times in telling his story, but his far-out dialogue is frequently almost impossible to follow, at least for an American. The scene is France, Spain and Andorra. The best part of the book is the description of a Lourdes with its tourist traps and the abominable merchandise shoved off onto the pious public. There are murders and mutilations until the villain, who is visible from the first, is run to ground. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)



Sherlockians will be delighted to learn that two of the cornerstones of the literature have been reprinted. The delightful *Practical Handbook of Sherlockian Heraldry* by Julian Wolff, M.D., B.S.I. is a very short work, but is nevertheless "the last word upon the subject." \$6.00 in soft covers. There is also a hardcover edition limited to 100 signed copies at \$15.00.

One of the most distinguished and sought after items in all Sherlockiana is *Simpson's Sherlockian Studies*, a series of nine brilliant papers that have been all but unobtainable. These have now also been reprinted and are available in hard covers for \$25.00. Both of these

excellent items are offered by Magico Magazine Publishers, Box 156, New York, NY 10002.

☆ ☆ ☆

E. (for Elizabeth) X. Ferrars (a pseudonym) has produced some forty novels in the mystery category and has won praise for consistent excellence. Her newest book, however, *Death of a Minor Character* is not likely to add to her established reputation. It is excessively talky and almost all of the events the reader would like to witness take place off page: they are referred to in conversation, so that the reader learns about them only second hand. Even the revelation of the criminal is so casual it almost passes unnoticed. The detective is Virginia Freer who appears again with her estranged husband in a secondary role. We hope Miss Ferrars will forgive us saying that this is not her best work. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Sherlock Holmes is back with us again in another pastiche, this one by David Dvorkin. It is called *Time for Sherlock Holmes*. In his retirement the master detective has discovered a magic elixir that will reverse the aging process, allowing him and Dr. Watson to enter the modern world and fly in the as yet unbuilt Concorde II. Surely this must be the same golden elixir first discovered and used, we are told, by Dr. Fu Manchu. Professor Moriarty has got hold of H.G. Wells' time machine to put him on the scene. If you are fascinated by all this, read on. The best thing in the book is the brief encounter between Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle whose writings Holmes regards as trivial fiction. (Dodd Mead, \$14.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: The Scribner Crime Classic Series brings back Philo Vance in *The Benson Murder Case* and *The Bishop Murder Case* by S.S. Van Dine, of course. The famous footnotes are all there. \$3.95 each. Also in the same series the notable *Haunted Monastery* by Robert van Gulik with the author's illustrations included. \$2.95 . . . Three Jacob Asch books by Arthur Lyons (see above) are offered in reprint by Holt Reinhart and Winston at \$3.95 each. They are *Dead Ringer*, *Hard Trade*, and *The Dead are Discreet*. These are excellent private eye stories in the traditional first person . . . If you haven't read Colin Watson a good place to begin is *Lonelyheart 4122*. Splendid humor combined with good mystery writing. Academy, Chicago (425 N. Michigan Ave. 60611) \$4.50 . . . H.R.F. Keating's delightful Inspector Ghote is on hand in *The Perfect Murder* Academy, Chicago \$4.50.

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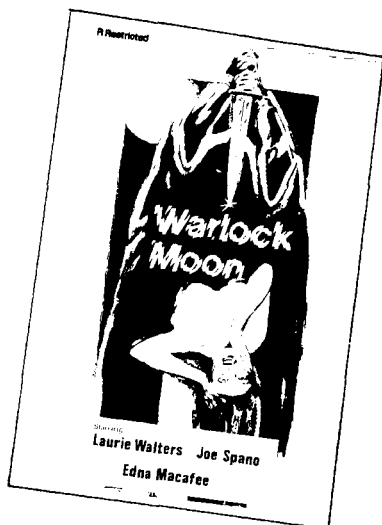
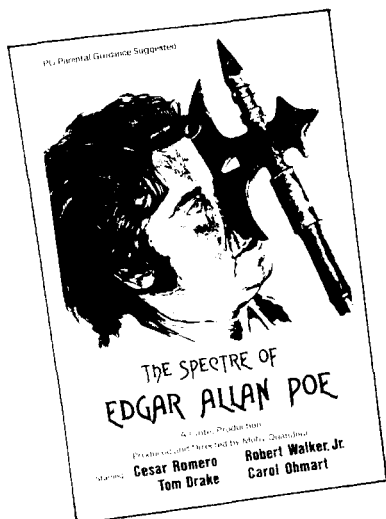
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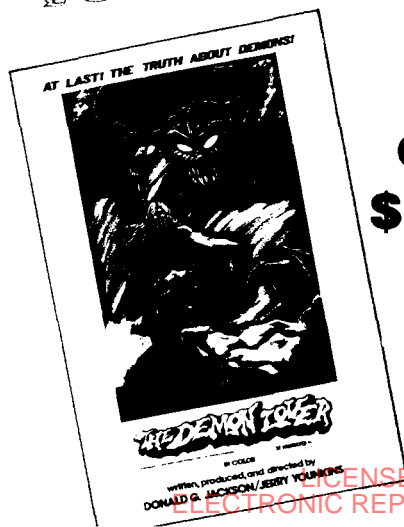
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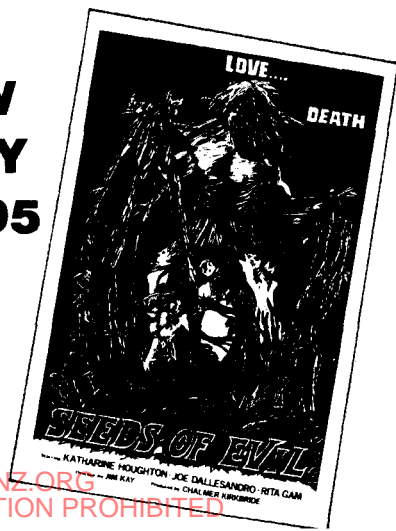


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